

Preferential option for the poor in Jon Sobrino's theology: Spiritual relevance to the Redemptorists' charism and mission in Vietnam

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Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

**Preferential Option For The Poor In Jon Sobrino's Theology:
Spiritual Relevance to the Redemptorists' Charism and Mission in Vietnam**

A Thesis Submitted in the Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Licentiate in Sacred Theology (S.T.L.)
at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

By
Thang Nhat Nguyen, C.Ss.R.
Directed by
O. Ernesto Valiente, Ph.D.
Second reader: Margaret E. Guider, O.S.F.

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty presents itself to us as the grave result of economic, social and political injustice. The reality of economic and social poverty, in any measure, always challenges the physical and spiritual life of its people. The poor lack the minimum standards which would allow them to live comfortably as human beings. They struggle to escape poverty and to live a life where there is sufficient food, shelter, health-care and education. They struggle to pursue a life that brings to themselves the dignity and their rights as human beings.

These same struggles for basic human life can be found today in Vietnam. Since 1975, the Vietnamese people have undergone so many sufferings and the face of overwhelming poverty has played a crucial role in it. Many families in Vietnam, especially in the rural areas, live with poverty on a daily basis. The statistical data in 2010 recorded by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat indicated that the proportion of Vietnamese people living on less than \$1.25 a day in 2005 was 22.8%.¹

The subject matter of this thesis is prompted by a deep concern for the human flourishing of life for all, and particularly for the poor, in light of both physical and spiritual perspectives. My project contends that Latin American liberation theology's central concept of the preferential option for the poor offers an important contribution to Redemptorist spirituality and its mission among Vietnamese Christians today.

In fact, the poor are located at the very center of theological setting and reflection. The words of the Second Vatican Council are still echoing as an invitation and challenge to Christians moving towards a deeper level of theological reflection, "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are

¹ <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/docs/2010/fullreport.pdf>, 25.

the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.”²

The poor are intrinsically rooted and connected to God inasmuch as God in Jesus has shown a preferential option for the poor. This is manifested in the mission and words of Christ. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor” (Lk 4, 18). God does not merely either pay attention to or make preferential option for the poor, but God from the moment of Bethlehem identifies God’s self with and in the poor. “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?...Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25, 37-41). In the Gospels, Jesus always gave special attention to the poor, to the abandoned and the marginalized of his time. Jesus not only taught the value of poverty but more importantly he chose to be poor, emptying himself in our human condition living out the virtue of poverty in thought, word and deed. During his earthly life, Jesus presented himself as one who associated with the poor. It was to them most especially that he proclaimed the Good News and offered the kingdom of God.

God and God’s kingdom become the Good News for the poor. The poor in response become the many beacons of light illuminating the mystery of God and the kingdom of God. In such a light of faith, the Latin-American liberation theologians, particularly Gustavo Gutierrez and Jon Sobrino, promote their theological reflections upon the mystery of the poor. Their theology focuses on a confrontation and engagement with the reality of the actual historical context in Latin America where so many members of Christ’s body are being crucified. Jon Sobrino says that the true reality of this world is “nothing more or less than the existence of a

² The Second Vatican Council, “*Gaudium et Spes* [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World],” in *The Vatican Collection: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (The Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 1979), no.1, 903.

large part of humanity, literally and historically crucified by the oppression of nature and above all by historical and personal oppression.”³ It is important to recognize the opportunity of learning what the Latin American theologians know about the poor and what they offer as direction for practicing fraternal discipleship among a crucified people.

Truly the poor appear as the most important reality and primary sign of the times by which people can experience the presence of God and Christ in history. It is in that frame of mind that I wish to extend my work to the Vietnamese audience. If Sobrino’s theological ideas powerfully impact the situation of Latin America, then they are also challenging to Vietnamese Christians, and particularly to the Redemptorists, as disciples of Jesus. Understanding the theological approach chosen by Latin American theologians can help Redemptorists better discern the challenges and mission in Vietnam. Sensitivity to the praxis for the poor in Latin America can be a contributing factor to the Redemptorist’s ministerial works in promoting justice and humanization to the social situation of Vietnam.

I will develop my work in three chapters. Chapter one will investigate the reality of the poor as the sign of the times. I will present a brief survey on the reality of the poor in relationship to their social, cultural, political and religious realities in Vietnam. In addition, a theological interpretation of the poor will be developed in this section. Chapter two will be divided in two sections. The first section will stress a hermeneutical approach on how the poor are treated in relationship to God. The second section will highlight the kingdom of God as Good News for them. This section will offer what is the response of people when they encounter the reality of the poor in their life. I will address a spiritual approach that emphasizes the praxis of the kingdom. Lastly, in chapter three, I will treat the possibility of learning from what has been

³ Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), 51.

gathered above to examine the spiritual and pastoral implications for the ministry of
Redemptorists in Vietnam.

CHAPTER ONE:

POVERTY AS THE SIGN OF THE TIME

I. Poverty as a reality in Vietnam

1. The reality of poverty in a socio-political world

In a very powerful way, globalization is defining the modern world. It is establishing a global communicable environment. The rapid improvement in communications technology has played a very important role in making the world a global village. This advance is reshaping many aspects of life related to economics, politics and society since it provides new possibilities for a modern connectedness and interdependence between countries, markets and peoples of the world.

Globalization has brought new dimensions to national and international economies in the world. On the scale of mutually social interactions, people are mingling with each other as never before.

It is undoubtedly true that profound social structures have changed under the impact of globalization, such as moral and religious beliefs, self-concepts of individuals and communities. The Internet allows people to easily transcend their personal boundaries. As a result, traditional and local values are transferred to a worldwide broadcast. Likewise, it is irrefutable that the world's economies have become increasingly more interdependent on national economies. Invisible constraint forces on international trade, information technology, investment and finances have managed to tie countries together. An invisible convergence has been established among non-governmental and governmental organizations. A market-oriented economy is providing avenues for an increase in the cross-border movements of capital, goods and services.

According to Jon Sobrino, on the one hand the word “globalization” carries with it a positive meaning. This word expresses the human attempt “to communicate and impose a judgment value: what is happening is good; we live in an inclusive world, one belonging to all,

and it is - or soon will be - a basically homogeneous and harmonious world for everybody.”⁴

Indeed, globalization creates many opportunities. Globalization through the integration of economies is considered a powerful force for the economic development of countries, organizations and people who are able to adapt to this trend. We do not negate these contributions of economic globalization to material prosperity in the world over the last several centuries. Thus, some people think that globalization brings forth the capabilities to alleviate poverty in some measure or form.

In my view, the economic benefits of globalization are much less important than the risk involved. Globalization brings small opportunities and huge risks and challenges. Globalization contains with it significant risks of increasing negative consequences: a loss of traditional values, inequality, polarization, environmental degradation, insecurity and poverty. This is especially true for the poor who are ill equipped to make the necessary adaptations. Sobrino notes the words of Luis de Sebastián, the Spanish emeritus professor of Economics at ESADE⁵ Business School, in talking about globalization when he says it is “like every process of social change, has produced winners and losers, beneficiaries and victims.”⁶ It is undeniable that globalization produces negative effects not only upon the people in the Third world, but also in among rich countries. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) states a fact that:

“Economic insecurity can be high in developing countries, where a large proportion of employment is in the informal economy, lacking coverage from social insurance. The informal sector accounts for 25–40 percent of annual output in developing countries in Africa and Asia. But economic vulnerability is not a problem in developing countries only. Due to the slow recovery from the global economic crisis, many people in rich

⁴ Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 43.

⁵ ESADE is the abbreviation of Escuela Superior de Administración y Dirección de Empresas.

⁶ Quoted by Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 45.

countries continue to face tremendous insecurity. In 2014 unemployment is expected to be more than 11 percent in France, around 12.5 percent in Italy and close to 28 percent in Greece and Spain, with even higher rates among young people almost 60 percent in Spain.”⁷

This realistic situation shows that even though developed countries have arrived at their present levels of economic development, many are excluded from its benefits following with their lacking of security and protection.

Let us look at the United States, one of the strongest economies of the world, to see in more detail how globalization affects people. Although Americans enjoy a very high standard of living, particularly in comparison to any other country in the third world, they still to some extent do not escape from ‘poverty’. The mechanisms at work in the enslavement of poverty are becoming much more sophisticated in this country. Americans are always confronted in the real world with the anxiety of becoming debtors. What percentage of Americans owns their own house? In fact, overall the banks have a much greater ownership interest in their homes and their land than the buyer. Many Americans work their entire life, and struggle to have their house paid off. Under the present trend of economic globalization, people in the richest country are rendered debt repayment machines. Debt follows them their entire life. Thus, the American dream is to reach the point of being debt-free. What is such a situation shouting out to us? It is saying that many of them are truly poor people.

Truly, globalization, according to Sobrino, always has the two faces of a coin, pros and cons. And people must see this. People are quick to view the economic growth with its benefits, while the negative link between growth and inequality is often ignored.

⁷ UNDP: *Human Development Report 2014*, 21. It can be found at <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr14-report-en-1.pdf>

1.1 Globalization and inequality

Globalization affects the inequality of the world income and this inequality is reflected within countries, between countries and among all people. Besides the benefits that come from it, economic growth is also found to increase income inequality to some extent. Globalization creates an unfathomable gap between the rich and the poor. The rich are getting richer while the poor are struggling for food and survival. According to Billionaire Bonanza: The Forbes 400 and the Rest of the US, by December 2015, “America’s 20 wealthiest people - a group that could fit comfortably in one single Gulfstream G650 luxury jet - now own more wealth than the bottom half of the American population combined, a total of 152 million people in 57 million households.”⁸ Likewise, the four hundred individuals at the top of Forbes’ statistics “own about as much wealth as the nation’s [the US] entire African-American population - plus more than a third of the Latino population - combined.”⁹

It is clear that iniquitous inequality has grown following globalization. “The 85 richest people in the world have the same wealth as the 3.5 billion poorest people. Between 1990 and 2010 income inequality in developing countries rose 11 percent.”¹⁰ According to the reports of the UNDP in 1999, “The income gap between the fifth of the world’s people living in the richest countries and the fifth in the poorest was 74 to 1 in 1997, up from 60 to 1 in 1990 and 30 to 1 in 1960.”¹¹ Globalization is widening the disparity between First World and Third World, between the richest and the poorest regions, and especially between rich and poor people. Jon Sobrino gives one example that expresses a cruel inequality, “If there existed even a modicum of humanity and compassion among human beings, the transference of barely 4% of the 225

⁸ <http://www.ips-dc.org/billionaire-bonanza/>

⁹ Ibid., billionaire-bonanza.

¹⁰ UNDP: *Human Development Report 2014*, 21.

¹¹ UNDP: *Human Development Report 1999*, 3.

greatest fortunes in the world would be sufficient to provide food, water, health, and education to the whole of humanity.”¹²

Indeed, looking at the dynamism of globalization over time we can see that it does not create an equal instrument of opportunity and inclusion for the poor. Decisions made by institutions are not always fair to specific individuals and groups of persons. The rich are offered more favors, enticements and instruments to get richer, but not so the poor. Paul Farmer has noted the unequal reality of deficient health and availability of medicine happening in the world,

“In the wealthy countries of the Northern Hemisphere, the relatively poor often travel far and wait long for health care inferior to that available to the wealthy...the poor there [the third world] have short life expectancies, often dying of preventable or treatable diseases or from accidents. Few have access to modern medical care. In fact, most of the third world poor receive no effective biomedical care at all. For some people, there is no such thing as a measles vaccine. For many, tuberculosis is as lethal as AIDS. Childbirth involves mortal risk. In an age of explosive development in the realm of medical technology, it is unnerving to find that the discoveries of Salk, Sabin, and even Pasteur remain irrelevant to much of humanity.”¹³

In most cases, who are the first recipients to good health care? They are the rich. Who are the first persons that benefit from advantageous information? They are powerful people. Who can readily take advantage of globalization opportunities? They are those who have enough capital, information and priorities to do that. The poor are weak and disconnected from all such facilities that could benefit them. The poor have less access to the necessary power, capital, information,

¹² Quoted by Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 39.

¹³ Paul Farmer, Health, Healing and Social Justice, in *In The Company of the Poor: Conversation with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez*, eds. Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2013), 41.

priorities and many other conditions, in comparison to the rich we might as well say that they lack all of these. The poor are deprived of sufficient economical capabilities in order to exercise their opportunity of receiving them. Quoting again the claim of UNDP: “Where social and legal institutions, power structures, political spaces, or traditions and sociocultural norms do not serve members of society equally - and where they create structural barriers for some people and groups to exercise their rights and choices - they give rise to structural vulnerabilities. Structural vulnerabilities are often manifested through deep inequalities and widespread poverty, which are associated with horizontal or group inequalities based on socially recognized and constructed group membership.”¹⁴

1.2 A globalized poverty

Globalization has accompanied poverty. Economic globalization plays an important role in its contribution to the increase of poverty. Poverty flows through economic globalization and we cannot turn our back on this general trend of globalization. Statistic data collected from many resources by the UNDP indicates, “More than 2.2 billion people are vulnerable to multidimensional poverty, including almost 1.5 billion who are multi-dimensionally poor¹⁵... Globally, 1.2 billion people (22%) live on less than \$1.25 a day. Increasing the income poverty line to \$2.50 a day raises the global income poverty rate to about 50%, or 2.7 billion people. Moving the poverty line in this way draws in a large number of people who are potentially vulnerable to poverty and reduced circumstances. In South Asia 44.4% of the population, around 730 million people, live on \$1.25–\$2.50 a day.”¹⁶

¹⁴ UNDP: *Human Development Report 2014*, 70.

¹⁵ The poor at the same time face many severe deprivations with respect to income, education, security, health, living standards and the like.

¹⁶ UNDP: *Human Development Report 2014*, 19.

Any person with common sense would question with sensitivity how this can be happening. This concern also turns its objective to Christian theology in respect to seeking human dignity. Why is it happening and what is the solution? However, before we can put forth any appropriate answer to these questions, we first have to examine what are the criteria of the material poverty that we are talking about.

Material poverty often relates to low individual wages or household incomes expresses. However, this kind of poverty describes only one perspective of multidimensional poverty. There are various forms of poverty. As a matter of fact, the poor are deprived of many things besides income. People are poor if they are “below or at risk of falling below a certain minimally acceptable threshold of critical choices across several dimensions, such as health, education, material resources, security.”¹⁷ Life experience shows us that any kind of poverty in skills, education, opportunities, happiness, health, life expectancy, welfare and social mobility can and does lead to more serious poverty issues in material measurement. There are huge challenges as observed by UNDP, “In 104 developing countries 1.2 billion people had an income of \$1.25 or less a day. But the multidimensional poverty headcount for 91 developing countries was an estimated 1.5 billion people - as measured by the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). According to the MPI, which was introduced in the 2010 Human Development Report to measure deprivations in the three Human development index (HDI) dimensions - health, education and living standards - 2.2 billion people live in multidimensional poverty or near-poverty.”¹⁸

Why do people stay poor? What is known about the causes of poverty? It is not easy to give ready answers that can cover all the satisfactory dimensions of human concern. Besides

¹⁷ UNDP: *Human Development Report 2014*, 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

globalization presenting itself as a cause of many negative effects, we can name some other specific and important causes.

Following the 2008 global economic crisis, a number of people worldwide fell into poverty due to unemployment. “An analysis of 65 countries showed that in more than two-thirds of them the employment rate had not returned to the pre-crisis level by the end of 2012. In some, such as Ireland and Spain, the long-term unemployment rate rose at least 20 percentage points over 2007-2012. Globally, about 200 million people are now unemployed.”¹⁹ The fact that globalization ties so many countries together has resulted in mutual interactions. If the economy of one country collapses, especially a powerful industrialized country, then this has huge impacts on the world economy. It will pull directly or indirectly many other countries with it in its collapse. Unemployment is the first serious consequence that will surface. Poverty, followed by unemployment, will follow out as ripples through the economic system.

Also, global risks connected with changes in the environment and climate control also appear as a secondary cause of poverty in many places around the world. The earthquakes in El Salvador (2001) reduced the income per capita of the most affected households by one third. In the floods in Mumbai (2005), approximately 1100 people died and many lost their homes. In 2011, a powerful earthquake off the east coast of Japan triggered large tsunami waves that killed more than 15,000 people. This earthquake caused extensive damage to the economic life of the people and affected the lives of thousands of Japanese. In the past five years the world has witnessed a heat wave in the Northern Hemisphere (2010), a tsunami in Japan (2011), a drought in East Africa (2011- 2012) and a typhoon in the Philippines (2013). About 200,000 people are expected to live with long-term disabilities due to the injuries sustained during the January 2010

¹⁹ Ibid., 42.

earthquake in Haiti.²⁰ Climate changes are adding to the growing poverty and insecurity of many livelihoods. Affected by these natural catastrophes, poor people are becoming poorer.

Finally, the geographic factors and institutional social structures also play an important role in increasing economic poverty. Such poverty reveals an inadequacy regarding national and international socio-economic structures. The failure to protect people against poverty is mostly a consequence of inadequate policies and dysfunctional social institutions. People can easily recognize one important aspect is that poor people tend to be clustered in specific places. UNDP indicates the fact that “three quarters of the world’s poor live in rural areas, where agricultural workers suffer the highest incidence of poverty, caught in a cauldron of low productivity, seasonal unemployment and low wages.”²¹ Also, the statistic data of UNDP witnesses, “Multidimensional poverty has a strong geographical component, since it tends to be highest in rural areas. In Somalia it affects 60% of the population in urban households and over 95% of the population in rural households. In Burkina Faso 43% and 94%, in Niger 56% and 96% and in Ethiopia 54% and 96%.”²²

Though people are more or less vulnerable to the factors described by the above statistics, some are much more vulnerable than others. I would argue that the poor are most vulnerable to these changes due to their high risk of future insecurity, deterioration and protection. The poor are defenseless against all the above damaging cycles in their life. UNDP shows why the poor are more vulnerable than the rich: “While vulnerability is generally an important aspect of being poor, being rich is not the same as not being vulnerable. Both poverty and vulnerability are dynamic. The rich may not be vulnerable all the time or throughout their lives just as some of the poor may not remain poor all the time...the poor are inherently vulnerable because they lack

²⁰ Ibid., 71.

²¹ Ibid., 19.

²² Ibid., 72.

sufficient core capabilities to exercise their full agency. They suffer from many deprivations. They not only lack adequate material assets, they tend to have poor education and health and to suffer deficiencies in other areas.”²³

Likewise, on a broader scale, some countries are much poorer and more vulnerable than others. Some regions are more being challenged by poverty and inequality than others. As measured by three dimensions of Human Development Index (HDI), UNDP exposes the inequality and poverty in the developing countries, “For health the highest inequality was in Sub-Saharan Africa (37 %), followed by South Asia (25 %)... For education the highest levels of inequality were in South Asia (42 %), the Arab States (41 %) and Sub-Saharan Africa (37 %)... For income the greatest inequality is in Latin America and the Caribbean (36 %), followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (28 %). Income inequality declined in Latin America and the Caribbean, although it seems to have increased in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.”²⁴

Although some Southeast Asian countries are grouped together as a developed or first-world economy, such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, still South Asia has a common economic feature holding it together with the Third World and that is its overwhelming poverty. Today, the people in South Asia lack sufficient resources required for a decent life. Among the many countries in South Asia still struggling with poverty and inequality and that has shown on increase in recent years, Vietnam is among them. The phenomenon of poverty grew even more serious in Vietnam with its economic collapse after the falling of Saigon in 1975. It is a fact that there exists a huge challenge in alleviating poverty and offering all people a decent way of life. In order to offer an authentic and coherent accountability regarding the poverty in Vietnam,

²³ Ibid., 19.

²⁴ Ibid., 37.

some reliable knowledge of the country, including its social, cultural, religious and political aspects will be necessary.

2. The reality of poverty in Vietnam

2.1 Vietnam: social-political background²⁵

Vietnam is a small tropical country located in Southeast Asia. Vietnam shares boundaries with China to the north, Laos and Cambodia to the west. The south and the east of Vietnam is a long Pacific Ocean coastline.

Vietnamese people have written a centuries-long story of how they engaged in battles against foreign domination. It is a history of oppression and resistance. For nearly one thousand years, the Vietnamese fought to preserve their distinct identity against Chinese domination. Then came ten decades against French colonization. Finally, there was twenty years of the so-called civil war between North and South. Under these repeated hardships, the Vietnamese neither lost their identity nor abandoned their hope for freedom, unity and most especially for regaining their independence. Peter Phan claims, “Centuries of fighting against more powerful enemies have molded the Vietnamese into long-suffering, resilient, and resourceful survival artists.”²⁶

The year 1954 is a very important time marker in the modern history of Vietnam with a “peace treaty” signed at the Geneva Conference. With this treaty the French agreed to withdraw from Vietnam, and the country was temporarily divided into two zones established by a Demilitarized Zone along the seventeenth parallel. The South government led by Ngo Dinh Diem was named the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). The civil administration of North Vietnam was named the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) governed by Viet Minh under the

²⁵ Mainly relied on Peter C. Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics* (New York, Paulist Press, 2005), 9-19.

²⁶ Ibid., 10.

control of Communist regime.²⁷ This signing treaty did not really bring peace to Vietnam at all since it set in motion the start of a twenty-year warfare between North and South.

The US wanting to prevent areas of the world, particularly the South of Vietnam from falling under Communist influence, intervened into the Vietnam war to support the leaders of the RVN government with military and financial assistance.²⁸ The war escalated dramatically. However, not long after 1968 the US looked for a withdrawal from the Vietnam war. The withdrawal came with the agreement of the Paris Peace Accords signed in Paris on January 27, 1973. Following the invasion of the North and the fall of Saigon on 30th April, 1975, the two parts of Vietnam were officially reunited as the Social Republic of Vietnam with only one-party system led by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). This remains the status quo up to the present time.

The CPV adopted Marxism-Leninist ideology and Ho Chi Minh's thought to shape Vietnam's political culture and serve as guidance for all governing policies of the leading party. The preamble of the Constitution 1992, Article 4 states, "The Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard of the Vietnamese working class, the faithful representative of the rights and interests of the working class, the toiling people, and the whole nation, acting upon the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Ho Chi Minh's thought, is the force leading the State and society."²⁹ Indeed, the CPV has identified communism with the present and future goals of Vietnamese nationalism.

2.2 Vietnamese family: cultural and religious aspects

Family plays a crucial and fundamental role in the cultural tradition of Vietnam. No true

²⁷ Viet Minh is an abbreviation of "League for the Independence of Vietnam" which is a political coalition formed by the Indochinese Communist Party on May 19, 1941. Therefore, after 1954 the North was under the control of Communist regime and this regime will dominate over the whole country from 1975 until now.

²⁸ By the end of 1968, the number of American troops serving in Vietnam was counted 525,000. For more details, see Foreign Relations, 1964-1968, Volume V, Vietnam 1967 found at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/johnsonlb/v/13161.htm>

²⁹ <http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/English/TheSocialistRepublicOfVietnam/AboutVietnam/AboutVietnamDetail?categoryId=10000103&articleId=10001012>

Vietnamese will deny this. The Vietnamese family is understood in two senses, a literal sense that is the nuclear family and the sense of an extended family that is the kinship. The notion of family also extends to all the people in the country. Although Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country with over fifty-four distinct ethnic minorities (EM) with their own language, lifestyle, and cultural heritage, they ultimately come from “one Mother”. Y-Lan Tran explains the notion of a countryperson by addressing the name “*Đồng Bào*”. The combination of two words (*Đồng*: the same & *Bào*: the womb) expresses that they are born from the same womb, having the same mother.³⁰ This myth of national creation leads to the belief that the Vietnamese people have the same parents. In school texts, “Au Co”, a typical woman, is described as the mother of the Vietnamese nation and maternal ancestor of Vietnam’s entire pantheon of goddesses.³¹

Vietnamese have nine different words to describe their blood kinship. It includes “*ky, cụ, ông bà, cha mẹ, con, cháu, chắt, chít và chít*” in accordance with “great-great-grand fathers (and mothers), great-grand fathers, grand-fathers, parents, children, nephew (niece), great-grandchild, great-great-grandchild, great-great-great grandchild”. It is a fact that very few countries have enough totally different vocabularies to depict blood kinship up to nine generations. Such notion of a countryperson and kinship system allows us to understand the close relationship and order among people in a family. This relationship lays the foundation for a powerful mutual solidarity among Vietnamese people. It shows how Vietnamese can survive amid great suffering, even in the midst of catastrophe, wars, conflicts and daily hardship. Regardless of what tribes they belong, they are brothers and sisters and come from one mother. Thus, they always manifest a powerful mutual solidarity expressed in loving and being loved. Their loving care and support for each other is not limited to material assistance but also extends to spiritual and emotional

³⁰ Cf. Y-Lan Tran, “Vietnam in Transition,” in *Transformative Theological Ethics*, eds. Agnes M. Brazal, Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas, Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, James F. Keenan (Ateneo De Manila University Press, 2010), 45.

³¹ Cf. Ngo Duc Thinh, *The Pantheon for the Cult of Holy Mothers*, In *Vietnamese Studies*, no. 131 (1999), 34.

concerns. The first phase of immigrants settling down abroad after the war are witness to this. These Vietnamese immigrants first helped each other grow in a new social environment and then to succeed in life.

In retrospect, Vietnamese are born into a long tradition with a complex social context, the effects of their historical-cultural philosophy and traditional religions. The Vietnamese family is strongly influenced by many socio-cultural and religious features such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity and Western cultures in varying degrees.³²

The traditional values of Vietnamese lifestyle, culture and philosophical ideas were deeply affected by Confucian ethics and beliefs. Confucianism came to Vietnam followed by different periods of Chinese domination. Giving a proper code of ethics behavior, Confucianism was gradually reinforced as the official social doctrine in traditional Vietnam. According to Nguyen Khac Vien, a leading Vietnamese psychological and cultural scholar in the 1960s and 1970s, the first test which Confucianism regime held was under the Ly's dynasty in 1075. It continued to be practiced as the intellectual and ideological backbone of Vietnam in 1000 years toward the final years of Nguyen's dynasty in 1919.³³ Since that time, some characteristics of Confucian philosophy such as hierarchy, sense of family and patriarchal authority have formed the structure for Vietnamese families.³⁴

Confucianism focused on purely human tasks and set down rules of life to be observed. It furnished principles of conduct, such as studying, improving and fulfilling one's social obligations in the here and now rather than a hope for an afterworld. Confucianism teaches people how to respect their parents, how to serve the king and how to conduct oneself. Khac

³² See Tran Ngoc Them, *The Quest for Vietnamese Cultural Identity* (Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh Press, 1997), 527-535, (Original in Vietnamese).

³³ See Nguyen Khac Vien, *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*, eds. David Marr and Jayne Werner (Indochina Resource Center, 1974), 17.

³⁴ See Tran Ngoc Them, *The Quest for Vietnamese Cultural Identity*, 49.

Vien states “Confucianism taught that man is above all a social being, bound by social obligations. The duties which Confucian doctrine assigned to everyone were one’s service to the king, honoring one’s parents, remaining faithful to one’s spouse until death, managing family affairs well, participating in the administration of the country and helping to maintain peace in the world. The basic preoccupation of every man “from the Emperor, Son of Heaven, to the last common man” was to mold and perfect himself so that he could assume those duties”.³⁵

Indeed, hierarchy in family and monarchical social order are the two important elements that set the standard of behavior in society. Affected by Confucianism morality, Vietnamese tradition always emphasizes the mutual aid, social public order, and family-focused hierarchy and rights. Individualism must follow or be subjected to communal well-being. In the thought of many Vietnamese, the rule of humanity is governing over the rule of law. It is distinguishable when compared to Western society where the feelings and happiness of the individual is given first prominence. Everyone is equal before the law. The rule of law governs all social aspects and each one’s behavior.

Besides the impact of Confucianism and its code of social behavior to help Vietnamese live in harmony with society and attain happiness in individual life, Vietnamese culture is also deeply imprinted by Buddhism as a core religion. Buddhism has a strong influence on the Vietnamese through Buddhist’s philosophy, especially its filial piety. Buddhist’s have a special day, called “Đại Lễ Vu Lan”, a remembrance of the departed, especially parents and ancestors. People are taught to respect parents, live in a peaceful way and perform good deeds.³⁶ Many Vietnamese find their spiritual refreshment and strength by making devotion to Buddha. With Buddhist’s philosophy and its teachings, people can find answers to the many challenges and

³⁵ Nguyen Khac Vien, *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*, 26.

³⁶ See Tran Ngoc Them, *The Quest for Vietnamese Cultural Identity*, 99-101.

crises in their life. Buddhism has remained the dominant religion in Vietnam and major influence in its cultural forces.

Christianity and Western cultures' influence also spread to Vietnam. Although it came rather late to Vietnam in 1533 by Portuguese, Spanish and French European missionaries, still Christianity began to develop rapidly. Among the Jesuit missionaries, Alexander de Rhodes played a very important role in creating the modern Vietnamese alphabet. Christian teachings on the family have also had a crucial impact on the Vietnamese. In the "Catechismus" Alexander de Rhodes addressed three degrees of honoring parents: (1) the father and mother in the family, (2) the king and (3) the heavenly father. He encouraged people to venerate ancestors according to the local norms.³⁷ Under Christian teachings, the filial piety of the Vietnamese, year by year, has taken shape in their mind and hearts as a principle way of life. Nowadays, although they only represent about 7% of the population, Catholics still play an important role in the socio-religious life of the Vietnamese.

Vietnam's culture has also been determined by another factor which came very later to the country. In the mid 20th century, Vietnam's society and culture adopted Marxian doctrines and the communist political system though Confucianism was still dominating. For Nguyen Khac Vien, there is a struggle of shifting from Confucianism to Marxism. He says, "Marxism thus came to Vietnam not as just another doctrine, but as an instrument to liberation after the Confucian scholars had failed to liberate the country and the effort of the bourgeois intellectuals against the colonial and feudal regimes had proved feeble and without promise."³⁸ Although many important differences exist between the two doctrines, they both share an emphasis on

³⁷ See Phan Dinh Cho, *Mission & Catechesis: Alexander Rhodes & Inculturation in Seventeenth Century Vietnam* (Maryknoll: N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 211-315.

³⁸ Nguyen Khac Vien, "Confucianism and Marxism in Vietnam," in *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam* (Berkeley: Indochina Resource Center, 1974), 46.

collective disciplinary spirituality and social obligations. In other words, regarding this similarity Marxism simply represents a new language to express the old ideals of cultural inclinations.

Thus, Marxism began to dominate and gradually replace the teachings of Confucianism.

Although Marxism has replaced Confucianism as a doctrine of political and social action, Confucianism has still left its positive mark. This is seen in its very good teachings regarding education, ethics, filial piety and respect for parents which are still considered as the most influential Confucian virtues in the society of Vietnam today. These valuable doctrines and practices continue to find value today in viewing the behavior of the Vietnamese young people. However, Confucian philosophy still shows some shortcomings and negative influences in its disregard for women.

2.3 Poverty profile of Vietnam

As mentioned above, material poverty comes through the exposure of lack of jobs and income, poor health and nutrition, poor education and skills, low household conditions, low inadequate livelihoods and lack of information and security. In noting the reality of poverty in Asia, Peter Phan does not hesitate to say “the dehumanizing poverty crushing immense masses of Asia is imposed or forced poverty, the product of oppression and injustice...”³⁹ This massive poverty in Asian countries is “brought about by colonialism, neocolonialism, economic exploitation by multinational corporations, institutionalized violence and military dictatorship.”⁴⁰ Although Peter Phan names some causes producing poverty, they can be simply arranged in two groups: (1) economic injustice, and (2) political violence, oppression and dictatorship.

Aftermath of war and poverty

It is a fact that independence has restored national unity in Vietnam after 1975. However, three

³⁹ Peter Phan, *Jesus the Christ with an Asian Face*, Theological Studies 57 (1996), 401.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 401.

decades of warfare has brought with it “heavy costs in the form of massive loss of life, physical injury, psychological damage, and a demographic imbalance characterized by a relative scarcity of males, destruction of the countries infrastructure, and severe disruption of the economy.”⁴¹

The lowest estimate of war deaths is 1,234,000 Vietnamese military and civilian from 1965 to 1974. This figure includes 220,000 South Vietnamese soldiers, 660,000 communist soldiers, 250,000 South Vietnamese civilian deaths from military operations, 39,000 civilians assassinated by communist forces, and 65,000 North Vietnamese civilians killed by American bombing.⁴²

Geoffrey Murray describes a ruined and devastated picture of Vietnam. In the South, sixty percent of the villages were destroyed. The North was not any better. Most major towns and provincial capitals along with main roads, railway lines, bridges, ports, and industrial facilities had been bombed. It is estimated that 14 million tons of bombs and shells had dropped like laying a carpet and nearly destroyed this land.⁴³

Moreover, what the Vietnamese people endured by untold suffering, material damage and death caused by the Communist dominion after 1975 was no less painful than what the aftermath of the war inflicted. The aftermath of war that brought its own destruction, death and suffering can be viewed and understood as an external expression of a political system bent on crushing any opposition. Many physical and spiritual traumas have pressed down on the people of Vietnam following the fall of Saigon. The independence did not bring peace to the Vietnamese people at all, but opened such a period of chaos and hardship. The independence was not mere victory in the minds of millions of Vietnamese. Rather, it marked an extremely difficulty post-war period. Another Auschwitz recurred in Vietnam with tortures, persecutions, imprisonments

⁴¹ Griffin, Keith, ed., *Economic Reform in Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 2.

⁴² Charles Hirschman, Samuel Preston and Vu Manh Loi, “Vietnamese Casualties during the American War: A New Estimate,” in *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 21, no.4 (December, 1995), 791. Writer's notes: these statistics did not count many deaths of American soldiers.

⁴³ Geoffrey Murray, *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 18.

and re-education camps. Murray indicates that hundreds of thousands of Southern soldiers, officials, and intellectuals were sent to re-education camps. It was about two million people who were dispersed around the world and exiled from their homeland.⁴⁴ In the same tragic situation, the post-war economy from 1976 to 1980 came to a deadlock. The industrial production grew an average of 0.6% per year and agricultural production gained 1.9%, while the population was growing by nearly one million a year.⁴⁵ All conditions caused the serious poverty facing every family during that time.

Vietnamese women's fate and poverty

In the context of Asia, Peter Phan especially pays attention to women. They are the objects of multiple forms of injustice and oppression. While focusing on the particular context of Asia, Kwok Pui-lan points out that worse conditions exist for Asian women. She says, "the so-called Asian miracle was built on the availability of cheap female labor, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, and inadequate labor protection."⁴⁶ Having engaged in analyzing violence committed against women in Asian countries, Kwok Pui-lan highlights three ways that continue the oppression of women. She calls these three the "unholy trinity" that is commonplace to life in Asia. The three are: Neo-Confucianism, patriarchy and capitalism.⁴⁷

If poverty is understood as the product of injustice and oppression, then Vietnamese women are truly the worst affected by that poverty since the male-centered viewpoint is still dominating within Vietnamese families. Men are to be respected and women are to be despised. This situation of life presents a huge inequality that is imposed upon Vietnamese women. In

⁴⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, "Fishing the Asia Pacific: Transnationalism and Feminist Theology," in *Off the Menu-Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology*, eds. Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-lan, Seung Ai Yang (London: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

other words, Vietnamese women are truly poor in the lack of dignity shown them. As such they are poorer in comparison with men.

Indeed, the Vietnamese society is highly patriarchal because of the ongoing influence of Confucianism philosophy. Its fundamental philosophy and essential rule of life teaches that women should sacrifice first to God and then to men. Its concentration pays core attention to adult male leadership in the family. Whereas women are told to follow the “Three obedience code which negated all possibilities of a woman’s self-determination. As a child, the daughter owed unconditional obedience to her father. When she married, she was to transfer her obedience to her husband. Even her husband’s death did not free her, for she was then bound to obey her oldest son.”⁴⁸

Although we can find traces of a matriarchal society at the very beginning of Vietnamese history, women’s oppression and suffering deepened during the time of the established Confucian ethics. Vietnamese women always enjoy less equal status than men. They are offered less favors, opportunities and suitable conditions to their rightful realization in history. For example, the important Confucian foundation is engrained in studying and education. However, only a man can acquire this favor. In that time when the philosophy of Confucianism strongly dominated, preference was given solely to the male child when he came of age for education. At a very early young age, the child had to recite that “from birth, man is good by nature, unpolished jade is worthless. Without study, man cannot know the principle of things.”⁴⁹ Today, female children can receive an education and are able to attend to some important positions in society. However, society still opens a very narrow door for women.

⁴⁸ Unesco Principal Regional Office for Asia and The Pacific, *Status of Women: VietNam* (Bangkok, 1989), 2-3.

⁴⁹ Khac Vien, *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*, 30.

The injustice against women is also presented through the obligation of producing male offspring. To past and present generations, the obligation of producing male offspring is still so important since it is an expression of filial piety bestowed on their parents. Because of this kinship system, the head of the clan should bear a son to continue the veneration of the ancestors and the family line. This is a “must” and having no children is considered one of the greatest breaches of the filial piety.⁵⁰ For a new couple the birth of a son is greeted with joyfulness from both sides of the family. After the first son is born a baby girl is considered an addition to a former fullness of happiness since “the daughter is a child of other people. Only the daughter-in-law is the true child of her parents-in-law”.⁵¹ Under such a social-cultural stance the understanding is that after a wedding the daughter in a family becomes the daughter of the family-in-law. If a marriage takes place in a family that has produced no male child, then that marriage is a disappointment to the whole family. In some very traditional Confucian families, marriage without a son is considered incomplete. I know a family that has five daughters but no sons. Every time I visit them, I sense how disappointed the father and family are because they have no male child. The Vietnamese have a proverb: “One man is of worth, ten women are of no worth”.⁵²

These investigations prove a fact that Confucianism undervalues an appreciation for women. This status expresses a serious kind of poverty and inequality over Vietnamese women. The validity of Confucian philosophy principles is certainly to be challenged if people see reality through the lens of justice, equality and prosperity. Truly, the Confucian philosophy and the dominion ascendancy meet each other in the core tied knot of masculinity. The loosening or

⁵⁰ Cf. Toan Anh, *Vietnamese Religious Belief* (Sai Gon: Nam Chi Tung Thu Press, 1965), 55.

⁵¹ Unesco, *Status of Women: Vietnam*, 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 5.

tying of this knot determines the closing or opening of the door to equality and justice for the dignity of women.

Political oppression and poverty

Modern Vietnam structure of society is the product of Communism. Since the politic orientation of Vietnam is being defined by a single-party, the CPV is putting this country under a dictatorial regime. The ruling Communist Party continues to keep tight control over the news media such as broadcasts on television and on radio, newspaper and book publishing. There is no free discussion on news media without permission of the government. Likewise, under Communist party rule, Internet access is highly restricted. Most of the time, people have to learn how to bypass firewalls to get access to social sites like Facebook or Twitter or critical websites and blogs such as *Letrai*, *Danlambao*, *Quanlambao*, *Bacaytruc* which hold disputes about politics, freedom and human rights. The Committee to Protect Journalists concludes most of the problems in a very concise statement,

“Vietnam’s Communist Party-run government allows no privately held print or broadcast outlets. Under the 1999 Media Law (Article 1, Chapter 1), all media working in Vietnam must serve as “the mouthpiece of Party organizations.” The Central Propaganda Department holds mandatory weekly meetings with local newspaper, radio, and TV editors to hand down directives on which topics should be emphasized or censored in their news coverage. Forbidden topics include the activities of political dissidents and activists; factional divisions inside the Communist Party; human rights issues; and any mention of ethnic differences between the country’s once-divided northern and southern regions.”⁵³

According to the 2015 list of the Committee to Protect Journalists, Vietnam is ranked as 6 of the

⁵³ <https://cpj.org/2015/04/10-most-censored-countries.php>

10 most censored countries and worst jailers of journalists worldwide. It is worse than Iran, China, Myanmar and Cuba.⁵⁴

Besides creating a media climate so oppressive, the Communist government of Vietnam also controls education on most levels. After 1975, all the Catholic schools in the South of Vietnam were confiscated and imposed limitations on offering education programs. Educational programs from University to Elementary must follow the orientation of communism.

Furthermore, the government of Vietnam actively suppresses political dissent and religious freedom. Many religious leaders who refused to accept party control were arrested or harassed. Thich Quang Do, the patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, has spent three decades in prison, and either internal exile or house arrest. The same happened to Bishop Ngo Quang Kiet and Father Nguyen Van Ly.

All persecutions show that Communists in Vietnam are practicing both obscurantism and demagoguery against its people. People are dispossessed of so many necessary facilities that automatically they become poorer in education, human rights, media and religious freedom.

Economic injustice and poverty

According to the statistics of the World Factbook, as of 2015 the population of Vietnam is about 94 million in which the urban population is 33.6%.⁵⁵ The number of people engaged in agriculture life is decreasing but it is still a high percentage of the population. Many Vietnamese are engaged in agriculture as well as a small scale of private activities. They have chosen these types of work as the main source of their economic income. Under normal circumstances such a life could keep them above the poverty level. However, Vietnamese farmers consistently encounter natural disasters every year, and this is especially true to central Vietnam. The data on

⁵⁴ More information at <https://cpj.org/2015/04/10-most-censored-countries.php>

⁵⁵ The World Factbook of Vietnam can be found at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>

natural disasters and their impacts are available from the OFDA/ CRED International Disaster database. In five years (from 2010 to 2015), there were 15 floods and 16 storms by which the total economic damage was approximately \$3 billions.⁵⁶ This data shows how poor farmers have to bear the economic vulnerability and poverty caused by natural disasters.

In addition, Vietnamese suffered in the past due to Communist expansion over the land and the aftermath from civil war and diaspora. A socialist planned economy in which the government held a decisive part played a dominant role in the national economy of Vietnam after 1975. Five-year plans in agriculture and industry launched by the government did not further the economic development but rather placed the economy in an unexpected situation of stagnation and hyperinflation. The reason was that a capitalist free-market economy was restrained while a collective economy was encouraged. Therefore, one decade after the event of 1975, Vietnam started its so-called renovation, or *doi moi*. *Doi moi* is not a reform in its literal meaning since it is just a “looking backward in order to fix something that has gone out of kilter” or “getting the country’s socialism back on track.”⁵⁷ This process was initiated by the economic ‘reform’ of 1986. Despite pursuing economic reform to a market-oriented economy, the ruling communist party in Vietnam still holds on to socialism and its centralized control of power. They show little willingness to give up its monopoly on political power. This political factor becomes a hurdle in transferring the means of production to the private sector - a necessary factor for the creation of a market economy.⁵⁸ However, to some extent this reform contributed in changing the socio-economic environment and somehow brought with it the transition from a centrally planned economy to some of the market-oriented economy changes. In other words, by sticking to this

⁵⁶ The International Disaster database can see at http://www.emdat.be/country_profile/index.html

⁵⁷ William Ratliff, *Vietnam Rising: Culture and Change in Asia's Tiger Cub* (The Independent Institute, Oakland, California, 2008), xi.

⁵⁸ Than, Mya and Joseph L.H. Tan, eds., *Vietnam's Dilemmas and Options: The Challenge of Economic Transition in the 1990s* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 15.

ideology of communism and socialism, the government may have won the political and social system, but by such a reform capitalism won to the benefit of many people.

Hence, Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in January 2007 is widely seen as an important milestone in the country's integration process to the world economy. Two important benchmarks highlighted the huge effort by the government of Vietnam to improve its national economic growth and reduce poverty. The data of the World Bank indicates that the poverty rate fell consistently from 49.2% in 1992 to 4.8% in 2010 and 3.2% in 2012 measured by the percentage of the population living below purchasing power parity (PPP) \$1.90 per day.⁵⁹ These impressive achievements in poverty reduction in Vietnam over the past two decades are both remarkable and irrefutable. And though we can witness an astonishing transformation to Vietnam in the twentieth century, the Vietnamese of today still encounter many hardships. Poverty is still prominent and especially in the rural areas.

Although 3.2% is a remarkable figure, we should look at another statistic data to get a bigger and more precise picture of the poverty reduction in Vietnam. According to the \$1.90 a day benchmark, the poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90 a day is 4.8% 2010 and only 3.2% of the population is at the poverty level. However, this rate jumps to 18.1% in 2010 and to 13.9% in 2012 when the \$3.10 a day benchmark is used.⁶⁰ Moreover, according to UNDP, Viet Nam's Human Development Index (HDI) in 2013 was 0.638, while the HDI of Thailand is 0,722 and Malaysia is 0,773. HDI of Vietnam expresses the medium human development category according to UNDP. Vietnam ranks 121 out of 187 countries and territories.⁶¹ What are such figures saying to us? It tells us that the Vietnamese still lives with the reality of poverty.

Even though Vietnam has been removed from the list of poorest countries, the task of

⁵⁹ Poverty data of the World Bank can found at <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/VNM>

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ UNDP: *Human Development Report 2014*, 161.

poverty reduction in Vietnam is still very much a work in progress. In respect to fifty-four ethnic minorities living in the highlands of Vietnam, it has become even more difficult. Ethnic minority groups are living predominantly in rural areas where the government has not paid much attention to the welfare of ethnic minority groups. They have less access to a free-market economy, trading activities, financial services, jobs, education, healthcare and the like in comparison with the Kinh group.⁶² Many people in urban areas are seeing a better economic growth, but this is not true for minority people. The statistic data of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences shows that “for ethnic minorities (EM), the chronic poor had the largest EM population share of 39.2%; followed by the transient poor (29.4%), the permanent escapers (12.8%, and the non-poor (as small as 18.6%).”⁶³ The minority people still receive little economic benefits from the reforms. They have been abandoned to abject poverty. They have not escaped poverty for good. “The biggest change in the poverty profile was a sharp increase in the percentage of households with heads coming from ethnic minorities, from 17.7% in 1993 to 40.7% in 2008. Poverty thus appeared to have become an increasingly ethnic minority phenomenon, which is largely explained by the uneven progress in poverty reduction across different segments of the population.”⁶⁴

The minority poor have been facing many difficulties. Among these are isolation, limited assets, poor levels of education and poor health. Such conditions make it nearly impossible for them to benefit from the economic growth of the country as a whole. “The slowest progress was observed in the North West region - characterized by a high population share of ethnic minorities and isolation from the national market - with the still high poverty incidence of 45.7% in 2008,

⁶² The Kinh is the largest group in Vietnam, approximately accounting for 86 percent of the population.

⁶³ Many authors of Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, *Poverty Reduction in Vietnam: Achievements and Challenges* (Ha Noi: The Gioi Publishers, 2011), xv.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

down from 81% in 1993...Among ethnic minorities, poverty rates was as high as 83.4% and 75.2% for H-mong and other ethnic minorities respectively in the Central Highlands, but considerably lower for Kh-Me and Tay at 23.1% and 32.1% respectively.”⁶⁵

In the face of all such economic and material issues, the question put before all Vietnamese and especially to the leaders of the country is this: what road will the government follow so that all people in Vietnam can enjoy real prosperity and wealth in the near future? It is the same question addressed to all the leaders of developing countries. Poverty still enslaves the lives of so many people. What can we do?

II. Theological and biblical interpretation of the poor

In the first chapter, we have just examined the reality of poverty as the product of oppression and injustice in regards to both socio-political and economic dimensions. Among the countries there exists a huge gap between the first and the third world that is ever deepening by the invisible economical sinking machine of globalization. Within each country, acts of injustice and oppression are presented as the dominance of the minority of the rich over the majority of the poor. Specific challenges facing the Vietnamese population can be viewed in what is happening. It is the unequal economic exploitation against the mountain tribes and ethnic minorities. It is the pervasive patriarchal dominance which is the real story of Vietnamese women. It is the extreme limitation in media access. All of these express a lack of goods necessary for human life and dignity.

Indeed, the poor remain the victims of economic, political and social injustice. However, the reality of the poor is not simply the existence of a vast majority of material sub-human persons. The reality of the poor does not remain merely as the object of social scientific

⁶⁵Ibid., xiv.

researches. The poor, who are seeking to transform poverty, offer us the possibility to a transcendent reflection. Is it always to stay like this?

This second chapter tries to view the reality of poverty and the poor through the lens of theological and biblical perspectives. If we open our eyes to look at the poor and poverty from the viewpoint of faith, then this reality has already been placed as the locus of Scripture. Poverty has already been experienced, thought, reflected and still remains an indispensable theme of theological reflections.

3. Who are the poor?

3.1 The poor in the Scriptures

Poverty does not only remain a social fact of life, but it also reveals as a central theme both in the Old and the New Testaments (OT& NT). And the poor directly involved in this reality of poverty become a central figure in the Scriptures as Jesus says, “The poor you will always have with you” (Mt 26, 11).

The word “poverty” is an equivocal term that can take on different nuances. In his groundbreaking work, *A Theology of Liberation*, published in 1971, Gustavo Gutiérrez recognizes the ambiguity of the notion of poverty. Thus, at first Gutiérrez tries to clarify it by distinguishing two kinds of poverty: material poverty and spiritual poverty. In Scripture, the words “poor” and “poverty” cover a wide range of meanings, both social and spiritual aspect. Then, from all these perspectives, Gutiérrez comes to the third positive understanding of poverty as “*a commitment of solidarity and protest*,”⁶⁶ or another word used by Aloysius Pieris “*voluntary poverty*”⁶⁷, to describe a way of life in which people associate in sharing and being in solidarity with the poor in their struggle for liberation. Three fundamental senses of the term

⁶⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), 299.

⁶⁷ Aloysius Pieris, S.J., *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 20.

“poverty” are used to be covered and developed by other liberation theologians, such as Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino and particularly by the bishops at Medellín (1986).⁶⁸

The meaning Gutiérrez understood of material poverty is similar to what we mentioned above about human-made poverty. “What we mean by material poverty is a subhuman situation... To be poor means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know that you are being exploited, not to know that you are a person.”⁶⁹ In the Bible, this kind of poverty is designated in the first place to express “a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God.”⁷⁰

There are instances of this poverty recorded in the OT historical books, the writings Job, Amos and Isaiah. Poverty here was portrayed as thirsty, hungry, painful, naked, and suffering from various kinds of injustice, exploitation and oppression including the durable loss of health, property, friends and family (Job 24, 2-12, 14). Prophet Isaiah condemned the oppressors,

“Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches? (Is 10:1-3)

The poor can also be found visibly in the Wisdom literature with their protection derived from God,

“For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them

⁶⁸ J Matthew Ashley, Kevin F. Burke & Rodolfo Cardenal, eds., *A Grammar of Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2014), 228.

⁶⁹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 289.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 291.

from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight.” (Ps 72:12-14)

The collective term “poor” and “poverty” are also magnified in the New Testament. The poor are described as the sick, the sad, the suffering, beggars, cripples and prostitutes (Lk 6, 21; 14, 21-23 & Mt 11, 2-5). Their external situations express the Calvary of poverty where the poor are mostly dispossessed of all their rights, both social and religious. Jurgen Moltmann indicates the poor in the Gospels as ‘non-person’, ‘sub-human’, ‘dehumanized’, ‘human fodder’.⁷¹

Jesus also identifies himself with the poor, saying, “*Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me*” (Mt 25, 45), and he was absolutely poor. Like many poor persons, Jesus did not have a home (Lk 9, 58) or a place to lay his head (Mt 8, 20). Jesus’ disciples were poor persons as well. However, as soon as he says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” (Mt 5, 3) he turns his poverty and his followers’ into richness, a richness of spiritual wealth. This is what Gutiérrez names poverty as spiritual childhood.

If spiritual poverty is often viewed as “an interior attitude of unattachment to the goods of this world. The poor person, therefore, is not so much the one who has no material goods; rather it is he who is not attached to them-even if he does possess them,”⁷² then spiritual childhood is “the ability to welcome God, an openness to God, a willingness to be used by God, a humility before God.”⁷³ Spiritual childhood poses one of the most difficult questions facing Christians today of the proper attitude toward possessions. Poverty does not consist merely in being materially or spiritually poor, but more important poverty is a struggle against mammon, the idol god opposed to God and to a Christians’ ability of accepting God as God.⁷⁴ Therefore, all Christians are called to be poor in spirit. Furthermore, although all Christians do not need to

⁷¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993), 99.

⁷² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 289-90.

⁷³ Ibid., 296.

⁷⁴ See Aloysius Pieris, S.J., *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 15-16.

embrace the evangelical counsel of poverty which is appropriate to a specific vocation, they are called to live its spirit. As stated in the Catechism of Catholic Church, “All Christ’s faithful are to live with the ‘spirit of evangelical poverty’” (CCC, 2546). The spirit of evangelical poverty is an archetypal calling towards a total disposition of the Lord, an attitude of entire openness to God’s love and providence.

According to Gutiérrez, the biblical notions of material poverty as a “scandalous condition” and “spiritual poverty as an attitude of openness to God and spiritual childhood”⁷⁵ advocate us to get a deeper meaning of Christian poverty. That is an expression of love, solidarity with the poor and protest against poverty.⁷⁶ The preferential option for the poor is not optional for all Christians. The poor are blessed since they are called to practice two dynamics of an action in their lives: (1) walking with Jesus Christ on the road of spiritual childhood poverty, and (2) actively following Jesus to put an end our service to poverty as mammon.

3.2 The poor as the crucified body of Christ

An active and radical commitment to follow the way of Jesus is a requiring urgency since we are living in an age where the poor are extremely suffering. The large number of the poor are lost from view in the huge world of the wealthy who are a small part of the population. The poor, especially in the third world, are swallowed up in the darkness of suffering caused by dehumanizing poverty. In history, the face of the poor is a portrayal of a ‘dying person’ who “is laced with death, not natural but historical death, which takes form of crucifixion, assassination, the active historical deprivation of life.”⁷⁷ By taking this into account we come to acknowledge the fact that there is a crucified people whose crucifixion is “caused by injustice, is accompanied

⁷⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 299.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 300-01.

⁷⁷ Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside The Poor*, 4.

by cruelty, contempt and also concealment.”⁷⁸ Theologian Ignacio Ellacuría started to recognize that the people of God the Church is called to serve is no other than “the existence of a vast portion of humankind, which is the literally and historically crucified by natural oppressions and especially by historical and personal oppression.”⁷⁹

Crucified people exist. This is not an abstract conception and definition. It does not come from the imagination of religious extremism. Truly, there exists a state of death-dealing poverty threatening the life of large human groups before our very eyes. Food shortages, shelter shortages and health care shortages are threatening the basic conditions for humans to live as individuals and as community. The crucified people does not simply mean the oppressed who are the victims of an unjust social structure. It is also a true accusation of a wide range of oppressors. Such an image is not much put forth to convey a state of dying. It also describes the reality that so many people are being put to death daily by uncaring tyrants, dictators and heads of state.

There is an intimate connection between the poverty condition in which the poor are living with the poverty Jesus freely chose to live. Hence, if Jesus’ struggle against gods of mammon led to his being crucified on Calvary, then the struggles of the poor against injustice and oppression also lead them to a Calvary of poverty. Therefore, the poor and the vulnerable are a mediation and an embodiment of the crucified Jesus. The fate of the poor and suffering people is inseparable with the fate of Jesus. Ellacuría strongly asserted that “this crucified people is the historical continuation of Yahweh’s servant, whom the sin of the world continues to deprive of any human decency, and from whom the powerful of this world continue to rob everything,

⁷⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁹ Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Crucified People: An Essay in Historical Soteriology,” in Lee, *Ignacio Ellacuría* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2013), 196.

taking everything away, even life, especially life.”⁸⁰ Likewise, focusing on the theological significance of this suffering of inhumane poverty caused by human beings, Jon Sobrino took the concept of “the crucified people” from Ellacuría⁸¹ a further step to show us the miserable reality of life that we might be ignoring. Sobrino makes a theological connection between the crucified God and crucified people. Sobrino says, “the crucified people are the actualization of Christ crucified.”⁸² He broadens the cross of Jesus by including the poor and the oppressed. Correspondingly, the reality of such suffering can speak closer to us. In a certain sense, through the poor and the oppressed we can touch the heart of the mystery of suffering and the mystery of God.

Indeed, the crucified people have been rightly characterized at the center of liberation theology in Latin America. This figure of liberation theology is necessary and urgently needs to be recognized in other parts of the world. Asia, for one, where exaggerated injustices steal from many innocent persons their basic rights to live as human beings. The outcry of crucified people has reached its summit. Everyone can hear their voice crying out loud and cannot ignore it. Thus, the words of the Second Vatican Council are still echoing as an invitation to Christians to bear solidarity with the crucified people: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.”⁸³

These words express the fundamental motive inspiring the great document of the Council

⁸⁰ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 51.

⁸¹ Ellacuría took this concept from Monsignor Oscar Romero.

⁸² Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, 51.

⁸³ The Second Vatican Council, “*Gaudium et Spes* [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World],” in *The Vatican Collection: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (The Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 1979), no.1, 903.

by noting the situation in which millions of human beings still live. These words are also pushing theologians towards a deeper level of theological reflection. In the fight against poverty, in the fight to protect the crucified people, theology has been encountering its own sorts of questions. What is the task of theology in our actual suffering world? Can we develop a relevant liberation theology that captures the hopes, the longings and the anxieties of the crucified people? What is the primary sign of our times? If it is that of the crucified people, what does the sign of the crucified people become for us as the body of Christ?

4. The poor as the sign of the time

4.1 The poor manifest God's presence

In encountering the crucified people as a universal and truly painful reality, particularly in the midst of the suffering and vulnerability of people in El Salvador, Sobrino is asking himself, "What is truly human has been showing itself to me...in the faces of the poor."⁸⁴ Maybe the most practical quest to experience God's presence confronting Christian belief and others today is the question of poverty. Poverty seems to be a huge obstacle, a hindrance blocking the pathway to God's presence and God's will. Rather, referring to many kinds of vulnerable suffering caused by death-dealing poverty, many questions at different levels are raised as well. "On the level of meaning, death-dealing poverty, together with its cause and consequences, poses the radical question of the meaning or the absurdity of history-the question of whether life is to be lived with hope, resignation, or cynicism. On the theological level. . . [it] triggers the question of God or of the Ultimate, of whether there is any truth to God of the Gods."⁸⁵ These are part of many other questions of theodicy, such as where does suffering come from? How can we understand it? Where is God in suffering? Why does God allow poverty happen while God is the source of

⁸⁴ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

justice, abundance and prosperity? What is God doing with the reality of poverty in history? Do these kinds of suffering things actually represent a genuine work of God? It can be said that the eruption of poverty and its cruel consequences continues to make its way toward integration into a more complete interpretation of God's presence in history. It is the way *via negativa* by which the poor reveal God's presence.

In fact, many people have tried to understand suffering or further to get a successful resolution to the problem of poverty, but still do not have an adequate answer for it. Suffering is real and poverty is still one of the greatest challenges we face in life. It remains an incomprehensible reality. Karl Rahner made a connection between the mystery of suffering and the mystery of God. He says, "The incomprehensibility of suffering is part of the incomprehensibility of God."⁸⁶ Suffering, for Rahner, places human beings into a mystery that will reach its climax in the mystery and revelation of God. When people accept suffering in view of the incomprehensibility of God and the freedom of God, then people in a concrete form accept God in Himself and allow Him to be God.⁸⁷ Truly, when Moltmann posed discussion on the theology of mystical experience, he said, "we know in order to participate, not in order to dominate. That is why we can only know to the extent in which we are capable of loving what we see, and in love are able to let it be wholly itself."⁸⁸

Thus, like suffering, material poverty besides standing forth and being recognized mostly in what it reveals to us by its negative effects somehow exists as a part of the deeper incomprehensible mystery. Life has already begun in history, yet it still struggles in its desire to be more prosperous and humane. The seed of justice is already sown, yet we still wait for it to

⁸⁶ Karl Rahner, "Why Does God Allow Us to Suffer?" in *Theological Investigations* 19 (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 206.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 207.

⁸⁸ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life* (Fortress Press, 2001), 200.

sprout and blossom. Salvation and the Kingdom of God is in our midst, yet still not in its eschatological fulfillment. There still exists the blinding spot of objective poverty. The darkness that poverty brings forth to a certain degree is overshadowing the wavering light of our faith in the presence of God. We see injustice and death dealing poverty in our world while God is God of justice and prosperity. We immediately want to intervene and redress this dominant injustice and poverty. We want a God to step in and do great things of awesome power to bring down the mighty from their thrones and exalt those of humble state. But God's way is the way of kenosis. God's way is not a human way. God chose to be with the poor, with the outcast and with the wretched rather than "put them on the way to becoming richer that is always fraught with violence; it puts them on the way to community which, as the Feeding of the Five Thousand shows, is determined by 'the culture of sharing'".⁸⁹

Thus, the poor in their poverty can be seen as those who reveal God's presence in a very particular way. "In the history of salvation, God's presence in poverty and suffering is a hidden, disfigured, crucified and scandalous presence; but it is also a salvific presence."⁹⁰ The poor are sacraments of God in history since they are capable of revealing God and God's loving care for and commitment to creation. God is still there behind all the mysteries of poverty and suffering. God can seem to be silent but God does not leave us without hope. Rahner says, "There is no blessed light to illumine the dark abyss of suffering other than God himself."⁹¹ In God to whom we belong, our voices are heard and all our wounds are healed at the right time and at the right place. In Jesus Christ, we do not endure pain alone but our sufferings are united with Jesus' suffering, our poverty is sharing and participating in Jesus' childhood poverty. However, it is

⁸⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 101.

⁹⁰ Dean Brackley, S.J., "Theology and Solidarity," in *Hope & Solidarity*, ed. By Stephen J. Pope (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 8.

⁹¹ Karl Rahner, "Why Does God Allow Us to Suffer?", 208.

necessary to say again lest there be any misunderstanding that we are not glorifying poverty. We are not glorifying material poverty since it stands forth as the greatest of moral evils and the fundamental sin of our world today. We will come back to discuss this in the next part of this paper. Here, we recognize one of the mysteries of the world that is not fully revealed at the present time, the mystery of suffering and poverty. And in the experiences of suffering, we are led to the assurance of God's nearness. Only in God alone do these worldly mysteries find their complete meaning. Suffering orients us to look for God as God. Poverty becomes a visible sign calling us to trust and hope in the invisible love of God.

However, facing God and his mystery is not merely a matter of faith. Faith is to be concretely accompanied by visible realities that bring us into relationship with God. Viewing God's presence in the poor cannot detach people from any specific or concrete social activities of solidarity. We can ask why Mother Teresa found the strength and the ability to continue to serve the poor in such a life-giving way for so many years? How did Archbishop Oscar Romero fearlessly speak the truth to protect the poor? How did Romero move his heart and love for the poor, knowing all the time that this way is leading him to Calvary? And where does this strength and compassion for service to the poor arise? Indeed, the poor whom Oscar Romero and Mother Teresa encountered helped them discern and recognize God's presence in their efforts towards seeking liberation and emancipation for the poor and the most abandoned. Holy Father Pope Francis also concurs with these two blessed, "In the poor and outcast we see Christ's face; by loving and helping the poor, we love and serve Christ. Our efforts are also directed to ending violations of human dignity, discrimination and abuse in the world, for these are so often the cause of destitution."⁹²

⁹² Pope Francis, found at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/papa-francesco_20131226_messaggio-quaresima2014.html

However, there is a deep broken-hearted truth that Sobrino brings to the forefront. The prevailing problem among people today is their refusal to recognize the reality of poor and suffering rather than their inability of seeing this reality happening before them.⁹³ People refuse to see the face of Jesus Christ through the miserable faces of the poor. Keeping this blindness of the poor before themselves, they find it easy to deny the truth and to diminish the suffering and poverty experienced by the poor.

Likewise, as soon as we ignore and pass over what is revealed to us in the signs of the times, in the poor, then we refuse to acknowledge the salvific economy of God in Jesus Christ that is revealed in them. The Lenten message of our Holy Father Pope Francis delivered in 2014 said, “In every time and place God continues to save mankind and the world through the poverty of Christ, who makes himself poor in the sacraments, in his word and in his Church, which is a people of the poor. God’s wealth passes not through our wealth, but invariably and exclusively through our personal and communal poverty, enlivened by the Spirit of Christ.”⁹⁴ This is the historical way in which God become present among human beings. Whatsoever Jesus did in his compassion towards the poor, the sick, the hungry, the prostitutes and sinners reveals not only his will, but reveals the Will of the Father. God desires to communicate and save human beings in an appropriate way, a way that manifests God’s love for the human race. God does not only show signs of God’s power in creation, but through Jesus Christ God reveals exactly the true content of the will and purpose God has for human beings. God speaks through the voice of Jesus-the language of a poor human person. Through the words and actions of Jesus, God speaks the language of those who are suffering and struggling to have a decent life, in both the religious

⁹³ Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope*, 38.

⁹⁴ Pope Francis, found at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/papa-francesco_20131226_messaggio-quaresima2014.html

and social areas of life. In fact, God turns up the volume to voice favor for the poor. And the poor turn to God as the only one who can liberate them from injustice and offer salvation. It is this way that the poor reveal God to us by the *via positiva* since God assumes and takes on in human form our death-dealing poverty to offer abundant life.

4.2 The poor reveal the evil world

Sobrinho's saying once again reminds us of the negative and positive aspects of globalization.

“When globalization is seen as economic reality, we learn two important things. As regards its salvific potential, despite its being “global,” globalization is no different from other economic processes; it is not as if, by its nature, it only produces good things. Globalization also produces evils, losers and victims.”⁹⁵ The victims of globalization are the poor and the excluded. The poor become the sign that leads us beyond ourselves to see the presence of God. The same holds true that this sign obliges us to look to the reality of undeserved poverty that is placed on them. The poor are revealing an evil world and calling our attention to repudiate this kind of death-dealing poverty.

Gustavo Gutiérrez gives three religious reasons why the Bible rejects material poverty: (1) poverty contradicts the very meaning of the Mosaic religion which offered Jewish people a promised land flowing with milk and honey. They were liberated from the slavery, exploitation and alienation of Egypt so that they could live with human dignity in the inherited land, (2) poverty goes against the mandate of Genesis where man is destined to dominate the earth with freedom and justice (3) man is the image, likeness and sacrament of God so that to oppress the poor is to offend God.⁹⁶ Poverty and injustice appear as the great negation of God's will for human beings from the beginning of creation.

⁹⁵ Jon Sobrinho, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 45.

⁹⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 294-95.

God is the God of life, joy and prosperity. God does not cause poverty but allows poverty to occur in this world. God cannot deny suffering happening in this world if God does not want to take away the freedom God grants to human beings. The possibility of true freedom entails the possibility of committing sin and the possibility of engaging others in evil works. Thus, sin as it appeared in the world today is no longer a merely personal sin, but it is a structural, social and communal sin that is sharply expressed in what we call unjust poverty. Poverty, which is viewed as an expression of evil, exists as a reality of a wrong choice or the damage done by a wrong choice. Whenever people choose to make wrong choices by taking life, love, joy or any of the basic needs from other people, they are rebelling against God.

Ellacuría approached this issue with a highly critical judgment. Our modern civilization “brought greater evils and its processes of self-correction have not been enough to reverse its destructive course.”⁹⁷ From the theological perspective, Ellacuría analyzed and proposed two terms, “the civilization of wealth” and “the civilization of poverty” to get more understanding of modern civilization.

Civilization, for Ellacuría, should be “a global order to living together”.⁹⁸ This civilization can offer everybody a good environment with all necessary possibilities to live as a human person. Ellacuría indicated what the civilization of poverty looks like, “The civilization of poverty...rejects the accumulation of capital as the engine of history and the possession and enjoyment of wealth as the principle of humanization. It makes the universal satisfaction of the basic needs the principle of development and the growth of shared solidarity the foundation of humanization.”⁹⁹ The civilization of poverty does not reject some positive aspects that wealth

⁹⁷ Quoted by Jon Sobrino in *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 9.

⁹⁸ Ashley J. Matthew, Kevin F. Burke & Rodolfo Cardenal, eds., *A Grammar of Justice*, 228.

⁹⁹ Quoted by Héctor Samour in *A Grammar of Justice*, eds. J Matthew Ashley, Kevin F. Burke & Rodolfo Cardenal, 211.

and capital bring forth in contribution to the development of human society. It honors the work in promoting scientific, technical, education, health-care achievements. However, wealth is rejected when it proposes a private accumulation for certain individuals and groups while all others are left without the basic needs to survive. Aloysius Pieris gives approval to this, “Wealth, therefore, is an evil only when accumulated. Bread too is a “sin against the body of Christ” if it consumed by a few while others starve...If wealth, too, is distributed “according to need” so “that there be no needy person”, it ceases to be mammon.”¹⁰⁰ Wealth is the great evil when it is idolized since idolizing wealth pulls humankind away from God.

Ellacuría put the civilization of poverty in contrast to the civilization of wealth “not because it proposes universal pauperization as an ideal of life...What is here meant to be emphasized is the dialectical relationship between wealth and poverty, and not poverty in itself. In a world sinfully shaped by the dynamism of capital and wealth, it is necessary to stir up a different dynamism that will overcome it salvifically.”¹⁰¹ If the reality of poverty and the poor show how unhealthy a society is and what cure can be offered for its disease and illness, then the civilization of poverty can also bring salvific light to the civilization of wealth because it can indicate in what way the civilization of wealth is truly sinful. The civilization of poverty has the possibility of shedding salvific light and grace because it builds upon a civilization of solidarity and generates hope for a more human world. In other words, the civilization of poverty brings the grace of conversion in the midst of the civilization of wealth.

¹⁰⁰ Aloysius Pieris, S.J., *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 20.

¹⁰¹ Quoted by Héctor Samour in *A Grammar of Justice*, eds. J Matthew Ashley, Kevin F. Burke & Rodolfo Cardenal, 211.

CHAPTER II:

THEOLOGY AS PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Standing before the reality of poverty and its tragic consequences, we cannot cease to struggle with and look for an appropriate answer to what is possible. Theology in its effort tries to find harmony between divine mysteries and human lives in the gap between God and humanity. Theology makes an attempt to bring light to the world following the example of God who reveals God-self in Christ. Theology makes room for the revelation of God itself to reach out to the human level in everyday experiences. In a lecture delivered at the Catholic University of America, Archbishop Joseph Doré mentions the multiple tasks of theology. He especially emphasizes the primary responsibility of theology as a link to the entirety of faith as an engagement in the whole world and to human beings.¹⁰² Gustavo Gutiérrez orientates the task of Christian theology as incarnated and historical theology: “Our task is to find the words with which to talk about God in the midst of the starvation of millions, the humiliation of races regarded as inferior, discrimination against women, especially women who are poor, systematic social injustice, a persistent high rate of infant mortality, those who simply “disappear” or are deprived of their freedom, the sufferings of people who are struggling for their right to live, the exiles and refugees, terrorism of every kind, and ...corpsefilled common grave.”¹⁰³

As Gustavo Gutiérrez asserts, “theology must be critical reflection on humankind, on basic human principles.”¹⁰⁴ It recognizes that theology is a second step: the critical reflection on Christian praxis.¹⁰⁵ Liberation theology must be a theology from below which does not simply repeat formulas of faith in God, but speaks about God who identifies with the poor and the most

¹⁰² Joseph Doré, *Theology's Responsibility and Tasks in Today's Church and World*, in *Theological Studies* 65 (2004), 705-08.

¹⁰³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 318.

¹⁰⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1988, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1988, 9.

abandoned. The mission of theology today as produced by liberation theologians takes the historical Jesus as the starting point for its reflection on Christology. It is the Christology that attends to classic theological themes while at the same time stresses the importance of life experiences. As Jon Sobrino explains, Christology is not merely the Christology of Christ but also it is the christology of the body of Christ.¹⁰⁶ Theology in general must give answers to these questions: How can we best encounter the many struggles in life? How do we incarnate the Gospel into the world and foster the values of truth, hope, justice and peace? How does theology communicate and change the world itself?

My approach to a theology that embraces the preferential option for the poor starts with the hermeneutical setting regarding the Christian God as the God of the poor. God is God of all and for all, but it is also a God that manifests a partiality toward those in most need. Likewise, although the Kingdom or Reign of God is universal for all, it lies most in favor for the poor.

I. God and the Poor

3. God's preferential option for the poor

In the Scriptures, a name often carries with itself a special meaning. A name is not only an identification but also expresses an identity of the one who bears it. In the Old Testament (OT), God reveals God-self to Israelites through names. God's people also called their God by many names or titles. The meaning behind each title reveals the personality, characteristic and nature of God that God's people would like to recognize. So we see the faithful God (Deut 7, 9); the righteous God (Is 45, 21); the jealous God (Ex 20, 5; Num 5, 14. 30; Joel 2, 18); the mighty God portraying a picture of God as warrior and champion (Is 9, 6); God of Truth (Ps 31, 5); or Compassionate God (Deut 4, 31). Among the many titles which are attributed to God, many place their emphasis on God's great love for the poor. Many times God has already laid out

¹⁰⁶ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 26.

divine compassion and intervention towards the poor and the oppressed. For example, God is portrayed as the defender of the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the meek and the oppressed (Deut 10, 18; Ps10, 16-18; Jer 22, 16). The Psalmist declares that “the Lord hears the cry of the poor” (Ps 34). God is the protector of the poor (Ps 12, 5) and the provider of the poor (Ps 68, 10; Is 41, 17). God has promised to send among the oppressed a savior to defend and deliver them (Is 19, 20). Realizing what lies behind the meaning of these so-called titles can lead us to a better knowledge of God.

Indeed, God in the Old Testament is God of the poor and God the liberator. Scriptures clearly claim the fact that God engages in the struggle to overcome oppression and liberate the oppressed. The primary story that best describes the image of God as liberator is the story of God who intervened in the life of Israel in order to rescue and deliver the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt. God speaks to Moses in the following manner,

“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me, and I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” (Ex 3, 7-10)

That God liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt surpasses a political perspective of liberation. This liberation conveys a more comprehensive perspective of salvation for the Israelites. It offers them lives which are more humane. Thus, we can come to a universal claim that if God liberated the Israelites in the past from slavery in Egypt, then the same God also

wishes to liberate the majority of people who are under the oppression of a structurally unjust social system.

After reading the words of the Exodus, a challenging question arises as to whether or not God is one who take sides with some individual persons and against others. Does God side with the oppressed and cast aside the oppressors? This common thread runs through salvation history in which God always stands by the oppressed and defends the poor. Gustavo Gutiérrez recognizes the dilemma between the God of all and the God of the poor when he asks “How can we reconcile the universality of charity with the option for a particular social class?”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, reading works of liberation theology, we can easily view a dialectic class struggle between the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressors. For these theologians, such conflict is a historical fact and not something that Christian theology should foster. This issue was often proclaimed at the time of Medellín and Puebla: “There are rich people because there are poor people, and there are poor people because there are rich people”.¹⁰⁸

Ernesto Valiente indicates the fact that “there is no indication in the Scripture that God’s preferential concern for the oppressed is rooted in the assumption that they are more deserving than or morally superior to their oppressor or enemies... They [the poor] are favored because they are in greater need than the non-poor.”¹⁰⁹ Truly, the love of God is both unconditional and inexhaustible. It extends to everyone regardless of someone’s state in life. However, regarding this divine preferential option for the poor Gutiérrez explains, “God loves them [the poor] simply because they are poor, because they are hungry, because they are persecuted.”¹¹⁰ God is the God of the poor by the mere fact that they are poor.

¹⁰⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 273.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted by Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside The Poor*, 31.

¹⁰⁹ Ernesto Valiente, *Liberation for Reconciliation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 30-31.

¹¹⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 1983), 95.

Jon Sobrino holds that God cannot be understood apart from his partial compassion and concern for the poor. The God of Jesus is the God of preference towards victims. This is a “God whose steps are firm, self-lowering and embracing,”¹¹¹ according to Jon Sobrino. Without doubt, God of the poor expresses the absolute difference between God and humans, between the unlimited and the limited, between the infinite and the finite. The poverty of human beings gives God a chance to freely share his love, freedom and abundance of life. However, Sobrino tries not to view the option for the poor as a confrontation with the oppressors. There are two different ways of this unique act to show God’s love appropriating with different individual objects. As Ernesto Valiente observes, “In a reality driven by oppression, God’s disclosure is at once revelatory and liberating... God’s justice liberates the victims from oppression, and God’s forgiveness liberates oppressors from their guilt. These merciful and liberating actions have as their end purpose our incorporation into God’s life.”¹¹²

The justice of God can be viewed as a crucial element that helps to explain the poor as preferential subjects of God’s salvation. God is the God of justice so that God liberates those whose life is oppressed. God is the God of life so that God sees an urgent need to end the unjust oppression and bring back life to those whose life is taken away. Thus, the preferential option of God towards the poor is about how to provide a counterweight to the unbalance of justice caused by the sinful actions of the oppressors. In other words, it implies a restoration of equity in an unjust world.

God of the poor that we have just examined is precisely manifested in the way God chose to associate with human beings. God does not limit Godself to the divine realm, but God’s close proximity to human beings reaches its summit in the Incarnation. Through the Incarnation, God

¹¹¹ Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside The Poor*, 118.

¹¹² Ernesto Valiente, *Liberation for Reconciliation*, 184.

draws to human beings closer than ever. The liberating truth of the invisible God in the Old is now fully presented in Jesus Christ of the New. According to St Irenaeus of Lyons, “what is invisible in the Son is the Father; what is visible of the Father is the Son.”¹¹³ Likewise, Vimal Tirimanna, a Sri Lankan Redemptorist moral theologian, says, “there is no disharmony or inconsistency in the truth in God and the truth as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ; there is perfect correspondence and harmony not only between the two persons but also between the same truth that exists in both of them.”¹¹⁴ Truly, God of the poor can be grasped as the historical Jesus who always walks with the poor in his society.

4. Jesus Christ is God’s own choosing to be with the poor

To see Jesus Christ as a primary Sacrament of God is not something new in the life of the Church. It is rooted in the New Testament in a profound way. The words and actions of Jesus Christ as they are recorded in Scriptures reveal Jesus as the true Image of God. Jesus, in short, is “making visible” the presence of the invisible God in our human history. Jesus then is the primary Sacrament of God. We cannot see, or touch, or hear God because he transcends this created world. But in the person of Jesus God is fully present in the world so that he can be seen, and heard, and touched. In the face of Jesus, we see the very face of God.

So, how does God reveal God’s favor to be with the poor in Jesus Christ? And how does Jesus teach and reveal God’s will in his own life, death and resurrection?

As we mentioned above God revealed God-self in the OT as the God who is preferential to the poor. The utterly new thing that happened in the Jesus’ option was not something different with the OT revelation of a merciful God in his preference for the poor. Rather it is the direct praxis of Jesus of Nazareth. We can only understand all this if we make reference to the divine

¹¹³ Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, “Adverts Haereseos”, IV, Sources Chrétiennes 100.

¹¹⁴ Vimal Tirimanna, C.Ss.R., “Hypocrisy: ‘A Serious Sin’ in the Teachings of Jesus of Nazareth,” in Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection, Vol.72/10 October 2008, 779.

and human person, Jesus Christ, who freely empties himself in the mystery of the kenosis hypostasis in history. By the Incarnation, poverty is part of the embodied God. What is accepted in the poor is also an acceptance of God. Bishop Oscar Romero did not hesitate to state, “The glory of God is a poor person who lives.”¹¹⁵ Shawn Copeland also expresses the same truth, “if seeing the poor is seeing God, then poor is the color of God.”¹¹⁶ She further explains, “to say that poor is the color of God means that God is one with, for, and on the side of the poor, excluded and despised. Poor is the color of God because God, in Jesus of Nazareth, in an act of divine love, took on the existence of the poor and became one with them, emptying himself of all the riches and sovereignty of divinity, becoming a vulnerable God of the poor.”¹¹⁷

In the context of Latin America, Sobrino places the historical Jesus of Nazareth at the center of his Christology. He says, “There can be no Christology of Christ apart from the history of Jesus of Nazareth.”¹¹⁸ Truly, Jesus of Nazareth is the important key to access to the total Christ. Sobrino writes, “Latin American Christology understands the historical Jesus as the totality of Jesus history, and its finality in beginning with the historical Jesus is to serve the continuation of his history in the present.”¹¹⁹ Sobrino’s understanding of the notion of the historical Jesus is different from scripture and tradition scholars who present their Christology “in such a way that believers, in order to be such, had no reason to resemble Jesus or follow and carry out Jesus’ mission in support of the oppressed.”¹²⁰ Whereas, in Sobrino’s Christology, Jesus of Nazareth reveals God as Father and shows how God acts in favor of the poor and the oppressed. In Jesus of Nazareth we encounter the way God of the poor acts in the historical

¹¹⁵ Quoted by Sobrino in *Jesus The Liberator*, 184.

¹¹⁶ M. Shawn Copeland, “Poor is the Color of God,” in *The Option for the poor in Christian Theology*, ed. Daniel G. Groody, 217.

¹¹⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, “Poor is the Color of God,” 217.

¹¹⁸ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1980), xxii.

¹¹⁹ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 65.

¹²⁰ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 15.

world. This encountering sheds light upon believer's option for the poor as a concrete way to live discipleship in whatever place the poor are.¹²¹

For Jon Sobrino, Christology should find its starting point in Jesus of Nazareth and his connection with the Kingdom of God. Sobrino stresses the importance of the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the correlative relationship between Jesus and his gospel, between God's kingdom and its addressees. Although the gospel is universal, Jesus specifically offers it to the poor (Lk 4, 18). The gospel speaks to the poor directly by what the kingdom of God offers to them. To them and for them Jesus proclaimed the Good News and offered the kingdom of God. It is Jesus who presents the gospel as the good news come down from heaven. The poor cry up to heaven and Jesus shows us how God listens and answers their cries. As Sobrino states: "The rediscovery of Christ has resulted from the rediscovery of the relationship between Jesus and the poor of our time, a relationship mediated by Jesus' message of good news for the poor in his time."¹²²

The person of Jesus of Nazareth is expressed through his deeds, works and actions in so far as they are accessible to historical and exegetical investigation. Jesus presented himself as an embodiment of God among the reality of the poor. In this regard, Pope Francis points out, "When Jesus stepped into the waters of the Jordan and was baptized by John the Baptist, he did so not because he was in need of repentance, or conversion; he did it to be among people who need forgiveness, among us sinners, and to take upon himself the burden of our sins. In this way he chose to comfort us, to save us, to free us from our misery."¹²³ Jesus chose to be poor and to be incarnated in poverty. He lived the virtue of poverty and taught about the value of poverty. During his earthly life, Jesus presented himself and translated his solidarity with the poor and

¹²¹ Ibid., 35.

¹²² Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 171.

¹²³ Pope Francis, found at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/papa-francesco_20131226_messaggio-quaresima2014.html

sinner into a series of concrete liberating actions: performing miracles, casting out devils, confronting the oppressors of his time and welcoming sinners. These actions challenged the existential ideology that ascribes privileges, respect, power and favor to the rich while at the same time showing contempt and disrespect to the poor and sinners. Therefore, a relevant Christology must take an accountability of Jesus of Nazareth as the good news of God for human beings.

Sobrino also builds his Christology on the foundation of the knowledge of the fully human and divine Jesus crucified on the cross. "Our new Christology must give the history of the flesh-and-blood Jesus its full weight as revelation."¹²⁴ For Anselm, Jesus suffered the crucifixion because God willed it as a satisfaction for our sins.¹²⁵ However, for Sobrino, Jesus' crucifixion happened because it was connected with a basic option of Jesus for the poor. It is the direct historical consequence of Jesus' life, words and deeds. Jesus seeks to liberate the poor from oppression while the oppressors try to prevent it.

According to Sobrino, on the one hand the death of Jesus is important to show that his suffering is the consequence of the conflict between grace and sin, kingdom and anti-kingdom, between life and anti-life, between the oppressed and oppressor. On the other hand, it invites the question about what is happening in society and how God acts in history. What does it mean to say that people are saved by the cross? The cross invites people to continue to follow Jesus on his way to stand in solidarity with the oppressed. As Jon Sobrino points out, "The cross suggests that the reality of God may be viewed as a process that is open to the world."¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Cited by Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator*, 46-47.

¹²⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus and Salvation," in *CTSA Proceedings 49*, ed. Paul Crowley (Santa Clara: CTSA, 1994), 5.

¹²⁶ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 234.

In fact, the cross presents how far sin will go and how deep love does manifest. “What God’s suffering on the cross says in the end is that the God who fights against human suffering wanted to show solidarity with human beings who suffer, and that God’s fight against suffering is also waged in human way.”¹²⁷ Thus, Jesus’ cross brings salvation since it manifests the saving love of God. As Sobrino claims, “God lets Jesus die to be able to communicate to us his plan for life.”¹²⁸

In taking the crucified Jesus as a central concern for Christian theology, Sobrino develops a Christology situated within the whole history of El Salvador. It is closely connected with the issues and problems of Latin America’s context, where people have faced actual dehumanization in the darkness of poverty, injustice, oppression and captivity. Sobrino ties the death of Jesus on the cross to the idea of liberation. Sobrino quotes Ignacio Ellacuría, “This crucified people is the historical continuation of Yahweh’s Servant, whom the sin of the world continues to deprive of his human face.”¹²⁹ The mystical body of Christ is a mediation of God’s presence among us through the crucified bodies marked by poverty, oppression, inequality, injustice and many kinds of dehumanization. Sobrino strongly asserts, “God suffered on Jesus’ cross and on those of this world’s victims by being their non-active and silent witness.”¹³⁰ Consequently, Sobrino’s Christology shifts our focus to a practical understanding both of the imagination of God in Jesus Christ and mission of Christians who are the disciples of Jesus Christ. The God of Jesus is the God who is encountered in concrete, embodied persons whose personhood is devalued and rejected in life.

¹²⁷ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator*, 245.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 244.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 255.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 244.

Jesus himself is not only present to believers as “the historical sacrament of God’s option for the poor,”¹³¹ but also comes as one who invites and leads them to the reality of the Kingdom. It is a fact that God-self is the ultimate person with whom believers never cease seeking communion. Only in God will believers find the whole truth and happiness. And God’s Kingdom is the ultimate reality and the highest goal to which believers unceasingly desire to aspire.

Indeed, God cannot be understood apart from the Kingdom since the Kingdom is realized whenever and wherever God’s love is manifest and God’s will is fulfilled. God is a God of the Kingdom since God’s reality presents itself as both mediator and mediation. The target of our focus cannot be apart from the Kingdom of God which is associated with the triumph of the justice of God. The practice of that justice is to be found in the midst of the outcast and the poor. Sobrino writes, “The reign of God proclaimed by Jesus comes to us with this truth: that at bottom, and before all else, the Christian is a man or a woman immersed in the real history of humanity, which is a history shot through the enduring, scandalous problem of injustice, and that no one can ignore this problem and hope to attain either human or Christian being.”¹³²

II. The Promise of God’s Kingdom

3. God’s Kingdom and its approach

Biblical theology today has attested that preaching the Kingdom of God is at the center of the mission of Jesus. After receiving the Holy Spirit at his Baptism, Jesus makes clear his messianic calling. He came to Galilee to proclaim the good news, saying: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel’” (Mk 1:14-15). The kingdom which Jesus inaugurates is the Kingdom or Reign of God. This Kingdom is meant for all human beings. All people are called to repentance so that they can become members of it.

¹³¹ Jon Sobrino, “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus”, in *Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, eds. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 688.

¹³² Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 121.

Liberation theology has also attributed great importance to the Kingdom of God and has located the Kingdom in its central and ultimate investigations. Depending on where they want to focus or make emphasis, liberation theologians have developed their works with a specific view of the Kingdom. In order to grasp the quality and characteristics of the reality of the Kingdom, Jon Sobrino enlists more deeply three basic ways of approaching the Kingdom: (1) The notional way, (2) the way of the practice of Jesus, and (3) the way of the addressee.¹³³

3.1 The notional way

The notional way investigates “what the Reign of God was for Jesus from the starting point in the notion Jesus himself might have had of it”¹³⁴ as part of Israel’s traditional expectation. Jesus shared some elements of this expectation of the Kingdom which were already present in the tradition of the Old Testament when he spoke about the Kingdom as something good and liberative.¹³⁵ The religious culture of Israel presented the kingdom as the kingdom of God’s power and transformation. The power of God was expected to transform the whole of society. The power of God through God’s intervention will be the answer to the tragedy of an unjust world. Through the act of steeping in this cultural hope of Israel which is grounded in the promise directed towards the lordship of Yahweh, Jesus puts forward his own concept of the Kingdom as initiative gift, grace, good news and salvation.¹³⁶

Sobrino makes references to Kasper’s and Pannenberg’s Christology to understand what concrete content the salvation of the Kingdom really conveys. Kasper emphasizes the objective reality of the Kingdom which is love. For him, the important content of the Kingdom of God

¹³³ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 69-70. Sobrino also gives more discussion on this topic in the lecture: ‘Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology’ found in *Systematic Theology-Perspective from Liberation Theology*, eds., Jon Sobrino & Ignacio Ellacuría (SCM Press, 1996), 45-58.

¹³⁴ Jon Sobrino & Ignacio Ellacuría, eds., *Systematic Theology-Perspective from Liberation Theology* (SCM Press, 1996), 46.

¹³⁵ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 75.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 74-78.

preached by Jesus is salvation which means “the coming to power in and through human beings of self-communicating love of God.”¹³⁷ People have their experiences of God as the one who cares for them with a merciful and unbounded love. And then, in turn people respond to God’s love and the Kingdom by the act of love towards their neighbors. In historical language today, love must be in service of the life of those who are the victim of a world torn into death-violence and oppression. Love must be present as the substance of the Kingdom in a concrete form of justice.

Pannenberg shows the same position with Kasper that a life lived in love exhibits the imminent salvation of the kingdom. He also emphasizes a radical possibility of human openness to God and God’s Kingdom by saying, “Because salvation, the fulfilled destiny of man, consists in the fulfillment of openness for God, it is already for those who long for the nearness of God proclaimed by Jesus.”¹³⁸

These characteristics of this Kingdom, according to Jesus, are expressed as something good and salvific at hand. The Kingdom of God is a dynamic reality of the powerful, glorious manifestation of God’s salvific presence here and now. As Leonardo Boff states, the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed “will no longer be *utopia*-the object of anxious expectancy (cf. Luke 3,14) – but *topia*, the object of happiness for all the people (cf. Luke 2, 9).”¹³⁹ Moreover, the Kingdom of God is not only the object of Jesus’ preaching. Kingdom is not only a geographical dominion like worldly kingdoms or merely an eschatological reality people will attain. But the Kingdom is also a person. It is Jesus himself through his words and deeds as Ratzinger cited Origen to call Jesus “the Kingdom of God in person”.¹⁴⁰ However, Sobrino has warned against those

¹³⁷ Quoted by Jon Sobrino in *Systematic Theology-Perspective from Liberation Theology*, 46.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday Press, 2007), 49.

christologies, like that of Ratzinger, that reduces the kingdom to Jesus' person. The Kingdom of God dominates Jesus' whole public life. Jesus himself is the definitive and absolute mediator of the Kingdom and he is also the historic reality of the Kingdom materialized in history.

3.2 The way of the practice of Jesus

As stated above, the kingdom of God directs the life and messianic mission of Jesus as a whole. Whatever Jesus did during his earthly life shed light on what the Kingdom of God is all about. Sobrino posits, "There can be no doubt that through Jesus' practice we understand better what he meant by the Kingdom of God and anti-Kingdom, thus his practice explains better than anything else his historical destiny on the cross."¹⁴¹ For Sobrino, Jesus is the definitive mediator of the reign of God since "the concrete content of the Kingdom arises from [Jesus'] ministry and activity considered as a whole."¹⁴²

During the time of proclaiming the Kingdom, Jesus took sides with the poor and the marginalized in a concrete situation where the existing political, social and religious structures had dehumanized them. Jon Sobrino indicates some of the ways in which Jesus' life reveals God's Kingdom. It is his way through signs in the performing of miracles, the expulsion of demons and the welcoming of sinners and outcasts. He also revealed the Kingdom through his preaching particularly by teaching parables and the way of celebrating the coming of the kingdom.¹⁴³ These series of miraculous activities Jesus performed and his solidarity with the poor, the sinners, the outcast and the marginalized in society clearly presented signs of the incarnating Kingdom of God.

First, his miracles demonstrate that the kingdom is a present reality among people with its power of liberation. As Sobrino states, "miracles do not make the kingdom real as structural

¹⁴¹ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator*, 54.

¹⁴² Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 143.

¹⁴³ See Jon Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator*, 87-104.

transformation of reality, but they are like calls for it, pointing in the direction of what the kingdom will be when it comes.”¹⁴⁴ Miracles that Jesus performs are signs of the closeness of God. Jesus’ healings clearly show God’s great compassion in the face of human distress and suffering. The sign of the Kingdom through miracles also generates hope for the sick and the oppressed that they will be sick or suffer no more when the eschatological Kingdom comes. In fact, miracles are intrinsically connecting people with the promise of God, the kingdom of love and compassion.

Welcoming sinners also is a sign of the coming of God’s kingdom. By performing acts of healing, both external and internal, Jesus welcomes sinners and invites them to faith, conversion and desire for forgiveness (cf. Lk 5:24).¹⁴⁵ Truly, the kingdom is a gift for those who are ready to make a conversion to God like the prodigal son (Lk 15, 11-32). In this story, Jesus shows how loving and compassionate God is waiting to welcome back sinners. Welcoming, eliciting conversion and receiving forgiveness are three complementary characteristics of the existential and historical realm of the kingdom.

Moreover, exorcisms are a very important act of Jesus to show the victory of the kingdom over evil. In Jesus’ time, there was a conviction about the presence of evil forces that could enslave human beings and Jesus did not deny the existence of such evil forces. He indicates clearly the presence of the evil reality of an anti-kingdom which is evidently contrary to the kingdom of God. The kingdom and the anti-kingdom are always in opposition and one acts against the other. In the present time, we still see the existence of many kinds of anti-kingdom which produce crucified deaths such as poverty, violence, human right deprivation... The reality of the anti-kingdom, its magnitude and its cruelty, can be truly grasped in actual life by

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 89.

¹⁴⁵ See *Redemptoris Missio*, 14

observing what causes crucified death instead of natural death. According to Sobrino, there still exists a valid proposition that “whoever assumes responsibility for the kingdom must be ready to bear the weight of the anti-kingdom”¹⁴⁶ in the unjust world we are living. Therefore, the kingdom of God which is utopia must aspire in the midst of historical realities to fight against the many kinds of dehumanization. As Jon Sobrino states, “Building the kingdom implies, of necessity, actively struggling against the anti-kingdom. And if the latter does not fight back, this means the former has not truly been built.”¹⁴⁷

Moreover, Jesus presents the very great value of the Kingdom through his teaching in parables. It can be said that Jesus never describes exactly what the kingdom is to be. He proclaims the kingdom of God and describes the growth of the kingdom like the yeast in dough or the mustard seed. The kingdom expresses how life comes to be, and thus the kingdom also invites human beings to seek life and to bring forth life to others. The Kingdom must bear fruit and attain its fullness in utopia, but it grows and radiates *hic et nunc* through the actual commitments of liberation.

Through all these practices Jesus touched the reality of the abandoned, the oppressed, the outcast, the marginalized and the sinners in their own real social-political and religious society. He brought to fruition the plenitude of God’s Kingdom as good news for them. Whereas, our connectedness to the existential experience of the poor, the outcast and sinners presents a good way to understand our faith in Jesus Christ and especially to better comprehend the Kingdom God offered to us.

3.3 The poor as addressees of God’s Kingdom

The way of addressees is the third approach enlisted by Jon Sobrino in examining God’s

¹⁴⁶ Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside The Poor*, 93-94.

¹⁴⁷ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator*, 95.

Kingdom. The poor are the special addressees of God's concern. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God and made it present as good news for the poor. As mentioned above, although the Kingdom is an historical and eschatological reality opened to all, it "does not prevent Jesus from having a specific addressee in mind when proclaiming the Kingdom of God... And these are the poor."¹⁴⁸ Jesus addressed this Kingdom in a direct and preferential way to the poor. When preaching the evangelical Beatitudes, Jesus made a radical assertion that salvation and the Kingdom of God are addressed to the poor as their legacy.

The dialogue of Jesus with the rich young man, related in the nineteenth chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel, can also serve as a useful guide for listening one more time in a lively and direct way to our world and the poor. Listening to this story, we might ask why is it so difficult for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God? Is there something wrong with being rich?

The young man wishes to have eternal life. He has kept the commandments so well. Truly, there is a connection between eternal life and obedience to God's commandments. Commandments are part of God's revelation and they show people how to conform themselves to the values of the Kingdom. By observing God's commandments, the man became a good man, but not yet a perfect one. For Jesus, to be perfect and to enter into the Kingdom, the man must not just observe and practice the negative aspects "shall not...", but must do something very positive "sell and give..." In this meaning, the Kingdom refers to a twofold indication. It presents us with an invitation and provides us with a reminder.

First, the Kingdom invites the man to stand at the service of the poor. Jesus often used the term kingdom of God in his preaching and showed us how the Kingdom of God operates in practice. He does not limit the Kingdom to intellectual knowing, but to acting and practicing. The proclamation of the Kingdom is necessary, but it is necessary to show the power of the

¹⁴⁸ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator*, 79.

Kingdom through service for the poor and the outcast. The Kingdom of God is not only in word, but also in deed. It must be the good news for the poor and liberation for the suffering. Jon Sobrino claims, “In today’s language, as in the language of the Hebrew scriptures, the Reign of God will be the reign of justice, a world organized in service of the life of those who had been victims, a world that tears up death and oppression by the roots.”¹⁴⁹ Indeed, the good news and liberation are nothing more than a preferential option for the poor and bringing life to those who have been denied and deprived of it.

Secondly, the Kingdom reminds us that it not only refers to a future life in ‘heaven’, but to the here and now. There is no longer a dichotomy of sacred and profane history, human and salvation history. The Kingdom includes both eschatological and historical elements. We cannot talk about the Kingdom of God outside the historical context. The Kingdom is not something that only belongs to the real of the divine and is isolated from human history. Sobrino tells us that the Kingdom of God must have some bearing on the historico-social world and not only on the transcendent.¹⁵⁰

The emphasis in liberation theology is on the Kingdom as having already begun. The notion of the historical presence of the Kingdom in liberation theology may be understood more precisely in terms of preferential option for the poor. God builds his Kingdom from and within human history in its entirety. The Kingdom of God is a reign of life and is unceasing in its desire for life. Thus, the Kingdom is so connected with the poor and their poverty, in their lack of elementary human needs and so always opposes any kinds of anti-life in history.

Thus, although the Kingdom of God cannot be separated from Christ the Mediator, it carries in itself both apolitical and political perspectives. According to Lisa Sowle Cahill, the

¹⁴⁹ Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, eds., *Systematic Theology-Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, 52.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 53.

Kingdom is apolitical since it “comes to represent personal communion with God in Christ, without integral connection to action in the world on behalf of excluded or oppressed peoples.”¹⁵¹ The Kingdom also conveys political characteristics since it calls concrete actions in history, first regarding to deeds and actions of Jesus Christ and then to the followers’ mission of struggling for justice and humanization. As Gustavo re-claims Fragoso’s assertion, “the struggles for justice is also the struggles for the Kingdom.”¹⁵²

However, it should be an important reminder that what we obtain in social-political struggles for the poor is not the same as the Kingdom. “The historical, political liberating event is the growth of the Kingdom and is a salvific event; but it is not the coming of the Kingdom, not all of salvation.”¹⁵³ Although the coming of the Kingdom is signified by the struggles for a just world, it is not merely compounded by the physical liberation for the poor. Rather it foremost makes the liberation of the Kingdom possible and becomes a truth for people. Gutierrez approaches the notion of liberation in three levels of meaning: (1) political liberation which is a liberation from structural injustice and oppression which destroys life and brings violent death, (2) the liberation of humanity throughout history which considers a humane continuous desire of seeking a new way in order to achieve individual fulfillment in solidarity with others, and (3) liberation from sin and admission to communion with God.¹⁵⁴ The third indicates that only God, sharply through Jesus Christ the Savior, “liberates man from sin, which is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression. Jesus Christ makes man truly free, that is to say, he enables man to live in communion with him; and this is the basis for all human

¹⁵¹ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Christ and Kingdom,” in Stephen J. Pope ed., *Hope & Solidarity- Jon Sobrino’s Challenge to Christian Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Book, 2008), 245.

¹⁵² Gustavo Gutiérrez rightly asserts Dom Antonio Fragoso in *A Theology of Liberation*, 168.

¹⁵³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 177.

¹⁵⁴ See discussion of Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 25-37.

brotherhood.”¹⁵⁵ This liberation of the people of God is brought about with the notion of ‘God is their king’ and the Kingdom of God is granted to them. Only God and God’s Kingdom brings human integral salvation. Only God can offer humanity a unified salvation of body and soul.

4. The praxis of the Kingdom

4.1 New logic in thinking

For many years, Sobrino has dedicated his life to the service of the poor and oppressed in El Salvador. He deeply seeks the authentic theological answer in face of the poor. He goes further beyond Vatican II and Medellín when talking about the preferential option for the poor. He does not just place the poor as the center of any theological analysis but also proposes “the option to let salvation come from the poor.”¹⁵⁶

Indeed, Sobrino emphasizes the important principle of liberation theology regarding the poor, “the option for the poor is not just a matter of *giving to* them, but of *receiving from* them.”¹⁵⁷ It is easy and common place for people to think that poor people know little and have little to say. Accordingly, few hear the poor and listen to the voices of the poor, in contrast to the rich. It is a mistake if people do not recognize this as a serious fault. The poor seem to be silent because their capabilities are weak due to lack of information, skill and confidence. However, they are not poor in their ability to give.

The poor present the truth that they are not merely receivers but also givers. The poor are not pure objects. They are subjects to bring to light the most important element for practicing hope and discipleship. They not only unmask the negativity of an unhealthy structure of society but also give light so that society should not always remain in a state of erosion which is depriving and dehumanizing. On the contrary, the wealthy are not just pure subjects of giving.

¹⁵⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 37.

¹⁵⁶ Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside The Poor*, 50-51.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 53.

They are also objects of receiving as well. Thus, this new logic includes an experience of solidarity in which “poor people and non-poor people mutually bearing one another, giving “to each other” and receiving “from each other” the best that they have, in order to arrive at being “with one another”.”¹⁵⁸

In this reciprocal principle, the poor play an important role in the process of innate logical transformation. The civilization that comes from the poor “makes the universal satisfaction of basic needs the principle of development, and the growth of shared solidarity the basis of humanization.”¹⁵⁹ The important backdrop of the civilization of poverty is that it leaves room for solidarity and sharing. It offers the possibility for renewal and transformation and fuller humanity despite its tragic condition.

According to Sobrino, the most important, most difficult and most challenging notion to grasp in Latin American reality is “the terrible reality of the Latin American poor is also precisely a matter of good news.”¹⁶⁰ How can the terrible reality of the poor which constitutes an ever-higher percentage of the world be on the one hand a great matter of existing evil in the world , and yet on the other hand be a matter of salvific possibilities? Sobrino repeats the words of Casaldáliga, “outside the poor there is no salvation, outside the poor there is no Church, outside the poor there is no Gospel.”¹⁶¹ The poor carry within them a twofold aspect: they are objects of salvation and the very same poor are subjects that can mediate God’s salvation.

In fact, it is a bit difficult for us to think about the poor as subjects collaborating in our salvation. However, the new logic Sobrino proposes is that the civilization of poverty sheds salvific light and grace because it “generates hope for a more human world” and “arises where

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 63.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁶⁰ Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 158.

¹⁶¹ Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside The Poor*, 51.

we least expect it.”¹⁶² In fact, the civilization that comes from the poor offers light to enable the civilization of wealth to see itself as it truly is. The rich receive what is being offered by the poor as Puebla 1147 said, “The poor have evangelizing potential. This potential is spelled out as “the gospel values of solidarity, service, simplicity and readiness to receive God’s gifts.”¹⁶³ Although the poor are often seen through a negative lens with bad consequences caused by their poverty, they offer in different degrees the positive gospel values of solidarity, primordial saintliness, sharing, charity, simplicity and trustworthiness in the love of God who cares for them and always loves them. That is an important element of salvation.

Moreover, for Sobrino, salvation emerges from the poor since God’s self-manifestation shows preference to the oppressed and crucified people. God is with them so that the crucified people have the power to call people into a process of being touched, offering help and committing to the poor. The poor as subjects of salvation means, in other words, that they bring us their salvation. It is not because they are the source of salvation, since only God saves. Yet we obtain salvation through the poor because that is how God is. God gives God-self as the poorest in Jesus of Nazareth through the *kenosis*.

Therefore, if we say that we can ignore the poor and their poverty since such people do not affect our own situations of life, then we lose our nature as human beings. “The option for the poor is a contribution that empowers them to take ownership of their voice by proclaiming the Gospel’s challenge to remember their human dignity as daughters and sons of God.”¹⁶⁴ The longer we accompany the poor and bear their heavy weight of poverty, the more luminous salvific light from the poor shines on us. The poor and their poverty are calling out this urgent

¹⁶² Ibid., 52.

¹⁶³ Quoted by Sobrino in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, 55.

¹⁶⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Memory and Prophecy,” in *The Option for the poor in Christian Theology*, 31.

task of solidarity and sharing that all people must intentionally undertake. Let us walk with them in justice, love and compassion.

4.2 New logic in action

That the very important topic in the theology of Sobrino is the preferential option for the poor has something to say and to challenge in the situation of the poor and other aspects of life. As Sobrino says, “to decide concretely to remove the suffering of the Third World is to carry on divine revelation, for such efforts are the praxis of God’s self and the praxis that God requires of human beings.”¹⁶⁵ Pope Francis has spoken in the same voice, “Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.”¹⁶⁶

In a truthful way, if human beings are living in a world of suffering, poverty and inhumanity, then they also are living in the horizon of hope and solidarity. Injustice of poverty not only calls for reflection but also for a reaction. Turning our faces to the reality, opening our eyes to the reality, one will find that primordial goodness of charity, solidarity, sharing, simplicity and trustworthiness is still there as something infused innately from the very beginning and is calling people into a real practice of discipleship. In other words, the poor are marking out the direction and the basic contents of Christian practice.

The option for the poor must be understood not just as something in word or in speech, but it requires works and truth that gives hope. Sobrino does not just change a new logic for experience of the poor but also offers a new logic of action. This new logic of action is humanizing instead of dehumanizing, promoting justice instead of injustice, being in tune with

¹⁶⁵ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, 30.

¹⁶⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 2.

the poor instead of ignoring them, centering on the poor rather than marginalizing them. In general, all dehumanization needs to be humanized in order to arrive at salvation.

This logic puts before us an important question of what is the best example for us to follow and practice fraternal discipleship with the poor. Sobrino insists that following Jesus in history concretely is the best way of living and practicing discipleship. His theological viewpoint claims that the poor and the vulnerable become a mediation and embodiment of the crucified Jesus. The poor are under the heavy burden of poverty and they are dying slowly and far too soon. They are crucified people. The mission of disciples is to take the crucified people down from the cross. Cuban-born theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz also talks about Christ in *Mujerista* theology, saying, “Our Christology is a praxis: what we believe about Christ comes out of our reality as marginalized Latinas, which is one of the struggles for fullness of life.”¹⁶⁷ What we believe about the message of Jesus of Nazareth sustains and motivates us in our everyday struggles against what limits liberation-fullness of life and for all that promotes justice and peace.¹⁶⁸ It is reasonable to repeat the questions of Sobrino, “what do I do to uncrucify them? What must I do for this people to rise again?”¹⁶⁹

Hence, the justice of God is presented through the way God acts in the event of Jesus Christ. The resurrected Christ has opened Christians’ minds and hearts and has shown them a new way of life. The answer to sustain us in our struggles for the crucified poor is that the Jesus event did not cease with his death but opened to the resurrection and to bringing forth truth, life and hope to human beings. If the event of Jesus’ death and resurrection brings forth truth, life and hope for human beings, then Christians are called to perform discipleship by entailing hope,

¹⁶⁷ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Christ in Mujerista Theology,” in *Thinking of Christ*, ed. Tatha Wiley (Continuum, NY, 2003), 158.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 159.

¹⁶⁹ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator*, 263.

life and truth for the crucified people in practical actions. Trusting him and his teachings completely, they will become committed followers in practicing discipleship as Sobrino asserts, “There is nothing as vital in order to live as a human being than to exercise mercy on behalf of a crucified people, and that nothing is more humanizing than to believe in the God of Jesus.”¹⁷⁰

What we are attempting to do is not only to help us strengthen our faith but also to deal with the struggle for liberation-fullness of life that we face every day. This struggle calls us to be creative in our thinking and in our action. We are to move from ignoring others to listening carefully to the voices of the poor. We are to move from passive listening to shocking alert, from shocking alert to awakening, from awakening to understanding, from understanding to faith, from faith to conversion, and from conversion to evangelization. On the one hand, this process is one of the great challenges today for practicing discipleship. On the other hand, it is an invitation for disciples to do something extremely practical.

Indeed, following Jesus is not only a calling from our faith, but also expresses our hope and utopia in God and God’s Kingdom. This hope gives us the encouragement to engage the world of the poor and oppressed people with the praxis of God. The mystery of the poor and their poverty challenges people in their thoughts and actions.

In short, when we make a small step to encounter the poor, we are making a huge step to encounter God. As Gustavo Gutiérrez claims, “Within a society where social classes conflict we are true to God when we side with the poor, the working classes, the despised races, the marginal cultures.”¹⁷¹ We need to take the first step of discovering Christ in the present in order to make contact with him in the present. We need to discover pure religious rites of worshipping coupled with acting and re-acting. By taking these steps people can reach a far more relevant gospel in

¹⁷⁰ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, 11.

¹⁷¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “The Poor in the Church,” in *The Poor and the Church*, eds. Norbert Greinacher and Alois Muller, Concilium Series No. 104 (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 15.

their very lives by a greater participation, association and solidarity with the reality of the poor, not as something individual but interpersonal, social and communal dimensions.

4.3 Fostering an Asian Church of the poor

In the formula of the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381), the Church founded by Jesus used to be defined with four chief marks: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. As usual, these four qualities are believed by many theologians to be the marks of the true Church. In some particular context, however, people wonder whether these is a different way to describe the Church. And what is the necessary purpose of the existence of the Church? Saint John Paul II offered this answer, “Empowered by the Spirit to accomplish Christ’s salvation on earth, the Church is the seed of the Kingdom of God and she looks eagerly for its final coming. Her identity and mission are inseparable from the Kingdom of God which Jesus announced and inaugurated in all that he said and did, above all in his death and resurrection. The Spirit reminds the Church that she is not an end unto herself: in all that she is and all that she does, she exists to serve Christ and the salvation of the world.”¹⁷²

The very existence of the Church is to serve God and bring about salvation for all human beings. Therefore, besides a traditional access through the four-mark way, Jon Sobrino, through the lens of liberation theology which proposes another way to grasping the Church. In order to offer a justified answer for the question “what is a church that resembles Jesus?”¹⁷³ Jon Sobrino says, “before all else, a true Church is a Church “like unto Jesus”.”¹⁷⁴ Jon Sobrino shows what it means to be the true Church of Jesus by emphasizing the praxis of Jesus. It is obvious that this Church is to carry out the work of Jesus by carrying in itself Jesus’ spirit and praxis and gathering those who are ready to follow in the same ideology.

¹⁷² Saint Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999), no. 17.

¹⁷³ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 15.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

By carrying the mission entrusted by Christ, the Church is defined in relationship to the world and to the whole humanity. How absurd would the Church look, expressing its faith and teachings, if it omitted to give emphasis to Christ and ignored the historical Jesus? How deficient would the praxis of the Church be if it were to ignore what Jesus did as he paid attention to the poor, the suffering, the oppressed and the sick in the society? How would be the Church if it would only concern itself with the ultimate salvation of people in heaven and forget the physical dimension of promoting truth, dignity, justice and human rights? Indeed, the holiness of the Church is not only limited to worship but also reaches her achievement in worldly actions. Therefore, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) presents the Church with an ability to meet the needs of the present day. The Church exists within, goes together and gets the same experiences with people, especially with those who are crucified by dehumanization. The Church has a duty to read the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel (GS 4) so that she might become the bearer of Good News for humanity. Therefore, *Gaudium et Spes* has used appropriate vocabularies to express relationship and dialogue with the world. The language of the Church now opens up further opportunities to promote dignity, hope, joy, union, solidarity, mutuality, friendship, and cooperation in the human family.

Likewise, in article 8, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, strongly affirms the mission of the Church in the world today. It says, “Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression, so the Church is called to follow the same path if she is to communicate the fruits of salvation to men... Christ was sent by the Father “to bring good news to the poor ... to heal the contrite of heart” (Lk 14:18), “to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk 19:10). Similarly, the Church encompasses with her love all those who are afflicted by human misery, and she recognizes those who are poor, and those who suffer bearing

the image of her poor and suffering founder. She does all in her power to relieve their need and in them she strives to serve Christ.”

Indeed, the Church comes to know herself and better express the mystery of Christ if she chooses to side with the poor as her central option. As Saint John XXIII said, “In dealing with the underdeveloped countries, the Church presents herself as she is and as she wants to be-as the Church of all men and especially the Church of the poor.”¹⁷⁵ The Church is called to be the Church of the poor because the Church follows the example of Christ in his poverty and in his care for the poor. Moreover, God of Jesus Christ is the God who always makes preferential favor for the poor and Jesus also identified himself with the poor. If God of Jesus sides with the poor, and if Jesus was incarnated as one of the poorest, then the Church must place the poor at the center at her praxis. As Gutiérrez spells out, “The Church wants to be faithful to the God of Jesus Christ, it has to rethink itself from below, from the position of the poor of this world, the exploited classes, the despised races, the marginal cultures. It must descend into the world’s hells and commune with poverty, injustice, the struggles and hopes of the dispossessed because of them is the Kingdom of Heaven.”¹⁷⁶ Thus, the Church cannot be understood apart from Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God. It is the Kingdom directed towards all people, but it begins with the poor, with their struggles, desires and hope.

Nowadays, some theologians are no longer speaking of a Church *for* the poor which always connected with a preferential option for them. Rather they propose to view the Church as the Church *of* and *with* the poor. Thus, the Church is not only called to alleviate the condition of the poor and to serve the poor but the Church is to witness evangelical poverty and at the same

¹⁷⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 287. Quoted by Radio Message of September 11, 1962, in *The Pope Speaks* 8, no. 4 (Spring 1963), 396.

¹⁷⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “The poor in the Church,” in *The poor and the Church*, eds., Norbert Greinacher & Alois Muller, Concilium Series no. 104, 13.

time to be “bound to material poverty”, that is what Medellín calls “a poor Church.”¹⁷⁷ For Medellín, “The poverty of the Church is, in effect, a constant factor in the history of salvation.”¹⁷⁸

In the language of Asia, the Federation of Asian Bishop’s Conferences (FABC) in Taipei 1974 also recognizes a pressing need that the Church has to identify herself with the poor. FABC clarifies, “Since millions in Asia are poor, the Church in Asia must be the Church of the poor. One element in holiness, here, is the practice of justice.”¹⁷⁹ This statement mentions two important dimensions that the Church bears out in her mission to the people of Asia. The former is obviously emphasized in the liberation theology of Aloysius Pieris who is deeply engaged in interreligious dialogues in Asia. For him, a valid theology of liberation in Asia, before becoming a *confessional formula* in the liturgical perspective, must first be born as a *formula of life*. This means that an authentic liberation theology must shape its formula from historical realities connected with the lives of the teeming masses of poor and oppressed Asians struggling for justice.¹⁸⁰ Therefore, the Church must take her mission “to step into the baptismal waters of Asian religion and to pass through the passion and death on the cross of Asian poverty. Until this ecclesiological revolution is complete, there will be no Asian Christology.”¹⁸¹

The Bishops of Asia emphasize the growing need to enter into a dialogue of life with the poor since faith in God cannot be lived out apart from service to the people in need. The Church and the Christian faithful cannot accept the oppression of the poor as something tolerable. The mission of the members of the Church is to live out and follow the Spirit of Jesus by being

¹⁷⁷ Medellín, *Poverty of the Church*, no. 5.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., no. 5.

¹⁷⁹ Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia; Federation of Asian Bishop’s Conferences. Documents from 1992 to 1996* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1997), 1:23 (no. 18).

¹⁸⁰ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 122.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 63.

actively involved with the poor and the oppressed. This demanding mission of the Church in Asia requires a radical emptying of herself as Christ emptied Himself (Phil 2:5-8). Cardinal Tagle points out,

“The kenosis of Christ means first and foremost emptying oneself of prerogatives.

Although it is a minority in Asia, the Church still has so much of which to divest itself in terms of privileges and wealth, whether real or claimed. As Christ emptied himself taking the form of a humble hidden human existence, the Church in Asia must learn to choose it because it is the way of the Spirit-filled Jesus. It just cannot wait for circumstances and place to dictate it. It is edifying to see discipleship lived in the humblest of ways among the poor of Asia. When priests and religious are content to have as little food as the nearest neighbors even when they could use their influence to collect more, dialogue in self-emptying happens. When lay people renounce lucrative jobs to serve and live with the neglected poor, dialogue in self-emptying happens. When the leaders of the Church declare that the poor are the center of gravity of the Church’s life and live by it, dialogue of self-emptying happens. The nobility of self-emptying love simply radiates through these heroic Christians of Asia.”¹⁸²

Of a similar voice, the way Cardinal Julius Darmaatwadja of Indonesia suggests how the Church in Asia should look like is voiced in these words, “the Churches must be immersed in the diverse contrasting and even conflicting realities of Asia. Only such immersion will help the Church define her mission to the people of Asia in an intelligible and acceptable manner.”¹⁸³

¹⁸² Antonio Luis Tagle, “The Mission of the Church in Asia: Living the Incarnation in Poverty and Plurality” in Vimal Tirimanna, *Reaping a Harvest from the Asian Soil*, (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2011), 128-129.

¹⁸³ Cardinal Julius Darmaatwadja, “A New Way of Being Church in Asia,” in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 63, 12 (December 1999), 889.

CHAPTER III:
SPIRITUAL AND PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY
AS REDEMPTORISTS IN VIETNAM

The praxis of the Kingdom is an invitation for followers of Jesus to continue his praxis in the present time. As Ellacuría has said, “The greatest possible realization of the Reign of God in history is what the authentic followers of Jesus are to pursue.”¹⁸⁴ Three suggested manners, including new theological insight, new ways of action, and especially being the Church of the poor, present the criteria by which we can evaluate how well we proclaim the Kingdom of God to the poor and how effectively the poor in turn present the Kingdom of God for us.

The Church is called to be the Church *of* the poor and a poor Church. The Church as the body of Christ is carrying out what Jesus Christ has done and commanded his disciples to do. The Church is preaching the Good News in different ways, especially in its action. Vatican II has identified the Church to be missionary in its essence.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, it is a fact that in response to Vatican II and followed by its *aggiornamento*, religious orders began a process of renewal to rediscover their charism. Religious orders re-examined its spirituality and pastoral ministries in order to accommodate themselves to the new demands in which the Church has to live and function. The Redemptorist Congregation has also been called to build a new model of evangelization that corresponds to the new model of Church emerging in post Vatican II. This new model of evangelization must have at its very heart the Redemptorist spirituality and mission, and the understanding that the essential task of the Church is missionary. As stated in our first Redemptorist Constitution, “the Congregation shares the mandate given to the

¹⁸⁴ Quoted by Jon Sobrino in *Systematic Theology-Perspective from Liberation Theology*, 40.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Ecumenical Council Vatican II. Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes*, 2.

Church...[which] is missionary of its nature.”¹⁸⁶

The Redemptorist Congregation seeks to be faithful to Christ and to the Church by making a preferential option for the most abandoned poor. This is the specific mission of its religious life.¹⁸⁷ Although there will always be differences from one context to another, there is always an urgency to rediscover the gospel and make it relevant in the lives of the suffering, the poor and the marginalized. We cannot close our eyes and deafen our ears to their needs. Whether people are Asian or American, African or European, the call to pay attention to the poor and to listen to their cries are similar. It is the cry of a people who need to be treated humanely. Thus, the poor are always the central concern of our Redemptorist mission.

Indeed, the whole stream of Alphonsus’ spirituality and the spirituality of liberation theology meet on the question of historical reality of the poor. In this last chapter, I try to present the concerns of Latin American theology with its preferential option for the poor and how this can resonate with the spirituality and mission of the Redemptorists to give hope for the poor. Likewise, the praxis for God’s Kingdom that Latin America theologians have investigated above can provide good opportunities for dialogue and learning between Redemptorists and Latin American theologians. Here now I wish to underline how the spirituality and praxis suggested by liberation theology can offer effective guidelines for Vietnamese Redemptorists: it can be a process of discernment in their present pastoral ministries. Above all, I will show that the praxis of the liberation theology perceived is set forth in a specific and powerful way by what Vietnamese Redemptorists are doing in service to the poor and the marginalized.

¹⁸⁶ *Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer* (Rome: 1988), no. 1.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 1.

III. Following Jesus as a Redemptorist

3. Saint Alphonsus: a liberating conversion towards service of the poor¹⁸⁸

Alphonsus de Ligouri was born on September 27, 1696 in Marianella, near Naples, Italy. He was the eldest son of eight children of an illustrious navy captain Don Giuseppe de Ligouri and of a very devoted mother, Donna Catarina Anna Cavalieri. From a very early age, Alphonsus was an exceptional child and was well educated in philosophy, literature, arts and especially religious studies. Alphonsus entered the University of Naples and was awarded doctorates in both civil and canon law by the age of 16. He practiced his profession of law and was a well-known and successful lawyer in the kingdom of Naples. However, this work did not satisfy him at the deepest levels of his heart and soul.

A crisis in his career at the age of twenty-seven marked his first conversion story. Indeed, reading the life of Saint Alphonsus de Ligouri helps us recognize what we might say are two distinct conversions. The first conversion story traces back to a major lawsuit decision when Alphonsus left the court after a bitter defeat. Alphonsus would later describe this verdict as one of deliberate deceit. This historical event led to an important transition. This first conversion in the life of Alphonsus would usher him from the life of a lawyer to that of becoming a priest. It was a fundamental conversion, a radical choice in favor of doing God's work rather than purely social work. Alphonsus left the legal profession to study for the priesthood even though his father was very much opposed to his decision. Alphonsus was ordained to the priesthood in 1726.

Yet this first conversion was just an initiation to a most significant conversion that would affect the rest of his life. The second one was a conversion towards the love of God in the service

¹⁸⁸ This is a very brief and glancing summary of the definitive life of Saint Alphonsus de Ligouri. More detailed biography about this Doctor of the Church will be narrated by Théodule Rey-Mermet in his book: *St. Alphonsus Ligouri - Tireless Worker for the Most Abandoned* (New York: New City Press, 1989).

to the poor. This conversion led him to his pastoral care for those in need, particularly the most abandoned poor in the kingdom of Naples, Italy. It also deepened his response to God's love. His life was now deeply connected to the infinite redeeming love for the people of God. At this point, we find many similarities between the life and conversion of Saint Alphonsus and the life of a leading liberation theologian, Jon Sobrino. Many such similarities can be seen in the development of his theology to which we have already made many references. Sobrino's mind and heart were also totally moved to compassion by his encounter with poor Salvadorans when he returned to El Salvador in 1974 and taught at the University of Central America. The real world of the poor in El Salvador spoke to him more than ever before. He describes this experience as an "awakening from the sleep of inhumanity."¹⁸⁹ Making that awakening from the sleep of inhumanity, he confessed, was really a painful experience in his life. What was happening inside his whole being was "as if layers of skin were being removed one by one."¹⁹⁰ Thus, we can view a resonance in the spirituality, option and praxis of two persons who lived in different places and periods of time.

With these two changes in his life, Alphonsus desired to offer people, especially the poor and most abandoned, an invitation to make their own conversion. To Alphonsus' spirituality this invitation was "the choice to transcend the self by way of accepting Christ as the center of their lives. They desire to enter the Kingdom of God and reject any counterfeit kingdom which would keep them locked in the prison of their own selfish concerns."¹⁹¹ His pastoral work focused on establishing "evening chapels" was a way by which Alphonsus gathered people and taught them catechism. It was also a witness of his compassionate and heartfelt love for the poor. This work

¹⁸⁹ This is both the title of the introduction for his book "*The Principle of Mercy*" and his own confession.

¹⁹⁰ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, 2.

¹⁹¹ Sean Wales, C.Ss.R. & Dennis Billy, C.Ss.R., eds., *Lexicon of Redemptorist Spirituality* (Rome, 2011), 66.

was one of his most original liberative innovations at a time when many priests in the kingdom of Naples had lost this kind of sensitivity for the poor, both in their material and spiritual needs.

Choosing not to be caught up in a world of luxury and allurements and to reject all the clerical benefits that Naples offered its priests, Alphonsus charted his courses toward the poor and the abandoned there in the kingdom of Naples. As a brilliant Neapolitan gentleman and priest, he could have had a very pampered life. Hence, Alphonsus was swimming against the current, especially when he chose to tend to the poor goatherds in the mountains of Scala. His apostolic experience among the abandoned led Alphonsus to realize that his life was a call to love. It was a call for self-giving to meet the spiritual needs of the people who did not know God and Church. Then, on November 9, 1732, he found the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, commonly known as the Redemptorists. The Redemptorists, like their founder, pattern themselves on the missionary life of Jesus. Their desire is to be like Jesus in every way. As stated in our first Constitution, “The Redemptorist Congregation truly follows the example of Christ in the apostolic life, which comprised at one and the same time a life specially dedicated to God and a life of missionary work.”¹⁹²

In the letter of petition that Alphonsus addressed to Pope Benedict XIV, in 1748, asking for the pontifical approval of his young Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, he showed an urgency to meet the spiritual need of the people in rural areas of the kingdom of Naples. Alphonsus also stressed that these poor and abandoned people spent their entire life without any knowledge of the Christian faith. He did not hesitate to put his finger on the cause: “It has reached the point that many, for lack of apostolic workers die, without the basic mysteries of faith, because there are so few priests who give the time to the spiritual need of these poor peasants; they are fearful of the cost of dedicating themselves to this work and of the many

¹⁹² Cf. *Constitutions and Statutes*, no.1.

hardships that must be endured in this ministry.”¹⁹³

The life and pastoral work of Saint Alphonsus is testimony to his liberative love for the poor, particularly when you compare it to so many other priests of his time. His preeminent writings on moral theology are marked attributes of his best effort to liberate human beings from the internal confinement of their souls. His morality indicates that people coming to confession should not have a fear of punishment due to a rigid judgment based on strict moral laws. Penitents’ consciences should be respected so that they can celebrate a joyful experience of God’s love and forgiveness. The issue of conscience will be obviously discussed in the next section. Anyway, Alphonsus offered a system of moral theology that avoided both laxism and excessive rigorism. In combating the rigidity and moral rigorism of Jansenism, one could say that Alphonsus in his time presented himself as a liberation theologian seeking to liberate moral theology. Indeed, Jansenist rigorism required strict observance and obligation to moral law. As such direct moral certainty bound people to a licit but narrow process of decision making. Such rigorism would not allow for any action to be performed that was based on the most probable opinion. In other words, Jansenist rigorism left no room for any probable judgment in respect to human freedom. Alphonsus combated Jansenist rigorism in his moral theology and also argued against a laxism that leans towards the slightest probable opinion as a rule of conduct.

The greatest contribution of Alphonsus to Catholic theology was his balanced moral theological reflection. Alphonsus’ work on morality was born from his pastoral experiences. It was developed from his experience with the poor, especially the poor coming to confession with their confused conscience. As Marciano Vidal, a Redemptorist moral theologian of the Province of Madrid, points out, “Alphonsian moral theological discourse is ruled not by the principle of

¹⁹³ Recited by Théodule Rey-Mermet, C.Ss.R., in Saint Alphonsus, *Lettere*, I, 149-151.

academic purity (intellectualism), but by the criterion of coherence with pastoral practice.”¹⁹⁴

Truly, Alphonsus developed a moral theology that was both prophetic and liberating. His theology shows a close connectedness with the concrete situations of life. It is a morality that seeks to help penitents live out their faith rooted in experience and by the regulation of moral laws already deeply present within their conscience. This is the salient feature that marked Alphonsus as a liberation theologian of his day. He always regarded conscience as the entry point in the study of moral theology. “Alphonsus followed the legal method of the manuals, but his description of conscience gives a tonality that has identified the followers of St Alphonsus since that time. Law constitutes the remote and material norm of human actions, while conscience is the proximate and formal norm of morality.”¹⁹⁵ According to this principle, confessors must respect the conscience of every penitent. This is true even in the cases of an erroneous conscience where penitents cannot or do not have the ability to recognize their mistakes. Speaking in general terms, “conscience should follow the dictates of the law, but the goodness of human action becomes known to a person through its approbation by conscience.”¹⁹⁶

The work of Alphonsus on the human conscience is still being echoed in the words of *Gaudium et Spes*. It says, “deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law and by it he will be judged.”¹⁹⁷ It is a fact that an emphasis on the freedom of conscience truly gives people the opportunity to live the dignity proper to human persons. Because of his very important

¹⁹⁴ Noel Londono B., C.Ss.R., ed., *To Be a Redemptorist Today-Reflections on the Redemptorist Charism* (Missouri: Liguori Publications, 1996), 375.

¹⁹⁵ Sean Wales, C.Ss.R. & Dennis Billy, C.Ss.R., eds., *Lexicon of Redemptorist Spirituality*, 59.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁹⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.

contribution to moral theology, in 1950 Pope Pius XII declared Alphonsus the patron of moral theologians. Alphonsus was canonized in 1839, and declared a Doctor of the Church in 1871.

Today the members of the Redemptorist Congregation continue to be enshrined in the traditional spirituality and the missionary charism of their founder, Saint Alphonsus. The evangelization and option for the poor derived from Saint Alphonsus' spirituality has characterized the very reason for the Redemptorists' existence in the past and present time. The Redemptorists have a specific obligation to the poor and the most abandoned entrusted to them. As stated in the first constitution which summarizes the general charism of the Redemptorist Congregation: "Its purpose is to follow the example of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, by preaching the word of God to the poor, as he declared of himself: 'He sent me to preach the Good News to the poor'."¹⁹⁸ Whatever might be said of the Redemptorists, it must always be said in reference to Christ, the Redeemer. The very existence of a Redemptorist depends on how much he persists in his option for the poor. If the Congregation loses this very fundamental charism, it loses its nature as a Redemptorist. If the poor, in their different manifestations, were to disappear from the world, then the Redemptorist would have no reason for existing.

4. The poor challenge the *Vita Apostolica* of the Redemptorist itself

Redemptorists are recognized as members of the consecrated life bound by the three essential evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. For Redemptorists, as stated in Constitution 47, "Profession is deeply rooted in baptismal consecration, and is a fuller expression of it. Consequently, by this act, the members are incorporated in a particular way into the mission of Christ as the ministers of the Gospel..."¹⁹⁹ These vows confirm the personal and community life of Redemptorists. They also constitute the basis for the other regulations of

¹⁹⁸ *Constitutions and Statutes*, no. 1.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 47.

Redemptorists' life, namely conduct and mission. The question arises as to whether there is a Redemptorist way of living the evangelical vows. There is no wavering in response to this question. The answer is an emphatic "Yes".

In the Spirit of Jesus, the vows lead Redemptorists to live in solidarity with the most abandoned poor. Living out the vows helps Redemptorists become sensitive to the loving presence of God as revealed in the poor and in the signs of the times. Indeed, the vows are "not the essential being of the apostolic consecrated life, but an existential means for living a radical love...I am chaste, poor, obedient in order to love God and humanity."²⁰⁰

To be a Redemptorist bound by the evangelical vows is to make a preferential option for the poor and most abandoned. According to Guillermo Giraldo, a Redemptorist priest of the province of Bogotá, living faithfully the Redemptorist charism now is "not simply 'staying' in the Congregation within the confines of institutions, but a 'living' in it, seeking each day a greater dedication to the poor. Seeking to 'reinvent' the charism of Saint Alphonsus in new circumstances and in a new epoch of history."²⁰¹ Therefore, besides the three fundamental vows for all religious in general, Redemptorists also take the vow of perseverance. The reason for taking the vow of perseverance is integral to the Redemptorists' commitment to the poor. This perseverance is a process of configuring oneself to the praxis of Jesus of Nazareth, to be an evangelizer of the poor and to be evangelized by the poor. In regard to this, the Puebla conference of Latin American Episcopate, in 1979, gave us an important indication of the evangelizing potential of the poor. It said that "commitment to the poor and oppressed and the rise of grassroots communities have helped the church to discover the evangelizing potential of the poor...Many of the poor incarnate in their lives the evangelical values of solidarity, service,

²⁰⁰ Sean Wales, C.Ss.R. & Dennis Billy, C.Ss.R., eds., *Lexicon of Redemptorist Spirituality*, 296.

²⁰¹ Noel Londono B., C.Ss.R., ed., *To Be a Redemptorist Today-Reflections on the Redemptorist Charism*, 332.

simplicity, and openness to accepting the gift of God.”²⁰²

Indeed, with the new appreciation for those who are oppressed and marginalized, the fundamental conviction of liberation theology proves the fact that the poor are not mere objects for our consideration. Rather with their capacity for sustaining hope, their ability to establish always new ways of sharing and solidarity in response to their many challenges and poverty, the poor are subjects of benevolent actions. Latin American theologians have taken this insight of the poor to a deeper level when they assert that the poor today are not only to be helped and listened to, but more importantly, they evangelize the non-poor. The relevance of new theological insights about the poor and their evangelizing potential has had a significant affect on the renewal of the Redemptorists. Communicanda 4 of the General Government of the Redemptorist, in 1986, chose the motto, “*Evangelizare Pauperibus et a Pauperibus Evangelizari*” as its theme. Living this Redemptorist spirituality, our missionary life is not merely to be evangelizers or alms dispensers, but it “must always mean a dialogue, a gift of self made from both sides of the interchange.”²⁰³ Josef Heizmann, a Redemptorist priest of the province of Switzerland says, “our Congregation should incorporate “being evangelized by the poor” into its self-awareness to complement and complete its understanding of what means to “evangelize the poor”. ”²⁰⁴

Certainly, the reality of the poor and the oppressed links the spirituality of liberation theology with the spirituality of Redemptorists. Likewise, the poor who challenge Christian praxis in liberation theology is always challenging the Redemptorists to live their evangelical vows. The poor leads to an unceasing reflection of the Redemptorist foundational charism. The poor continue to help Redemptorists rediscover their vocation in the Church. Their option for the

²⁰² Puebla, The Final Document, no. 1147, in *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutiérrez, xlii.

²⁰³ Noel Londono B., C.Ss.R., ed., *To Be a Redemptorist Today-Reflections on the Redemptorist Charism*, 51.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 51.

poor is a visible sign that verifies the fidelity of the Redemptorist religious vocation. Constitution 5 reminds each Redemptorist that, “Evangelization in the strict sense together with the choice in favor of the poor is...the badge of its [Redemptorists’] fidelity to the vocation it has received.” Hence, entering the Redemptorists is choosing a way of life which makes a preferential option for the most abandoned poor, in principle and in practice.

What does the preference for the poor mean for the Redemptorists? The 5th Constitution gives answer to this, “The Congregation’s mandate to evangelize the poor is directed to the liberation and salvation of the whole human person. The members have the duty of preaching the Gospel explicitly and of showing solidarity with the poor by promoting their rights to justice and freedom.”²⁰⁵ Just as liberation theologians insist on a personal, social and spiritual liberation, this Constitution proposes a twofold goal for Redemptorists’ achievement. First, the gospel Redemptorists bring should affect the entire person in order to transform all human values from both material and spiritual perspective. Spiritual hunger cannot be satisfied without attending to basic material needs. The Redemptorists not only help the poor grow in spirituality and faith but also endeavor to supply them with their basic material needs.

Second, the proclamation of Redemptorists always carries within itself both prophetic and liberating features. Redemptorists not only assist people in their own humanization but also seek to liberate them from oppression. Redemptorists are reminded that they “not only announce good news, but also denounce whatever prevents genuine human liberation.”²⁰⁶ In this regard, liberation theology has always acknowledged and strongly emphasized the need to work towards God’s kingdom and salvation for all here on earth and not simply wait for the end of time. The authentic work toward the kingdom is to fight against injustice and to build discipleship.

²⁰⁵ *Constitutions and Statutes*, no. 5.

²⁰⁶ Sean Wales, C.Ss.R. & Dennis Billy, C.Ss.R., eds., *Lexicon of Redemptorist Spirituality*, 109.

Salvation for human beings within this historical context is to bring about liberation and freedom from all kinds of oppression. As Sobrino contends building the kingdom always implies struggles against what belongs to the anti-kingdom.²⁰⁷ In other words, the kingdom is actualized whenever the poor are respected and wherever the values of justice, compassion and discipleship are fostered.

Indeed, before liberation theology suggested this practical solidarity with the poor, the option for the poor was already placed in the hearts of the Redemptorists. However, the way of Christian praxis that Latin American theology has now proposed adds more fuel to the flames burning in the very heart of Redemptorists' religious life and pastoral works. The understanding of the Kingdom of God derived from Latin American theology as something associated with the triumph of the justice of God, and the practice of that justice²⁰⁸ challenges Redemptorists to closely examine the way they relate to those with whom they are called to be in solidarity. Hence, paying attention to the poor is not only something central in their lives, but must also be an internal dynamic movement that rules their daily lives. Their reality and *modus operandi* is the life and death of the poor. Although expressed concretely in different ministers, the only way fully suited to the life of the Redemptorists is to be fully committed to the promotion of justice, freedom and human rights for all people, especially the poor and the oppressed. This means the Redemptorists must critically denounce the political or economic structures that oppress people. Redemptorists must work in solidarity with the poor to encourage liberation and together find new ways to advance this liberation. As such, Redemptorists seek to creatively reproduce the life and spirit of Jesus in their concrete and historical situations.

²⁰⁷ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 95.

²⁰⁸ Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 121.

In order to fulfill the mandate received from the Church in the context of the modern world, the Congregation has embarked on a process of conversion and transformation. As the Puebla conference stated, “the poor challenge the church at all times, summoning it to conversion.”²⁰⁹ For Redemptorists, this is a process of seeking an authentic way to live its *Vita apostolica* which “comprises at one and the same time a life specially dedicated to God and a life of missionary work.”²¹⁰ The apostolic life of the Redemptorists does not equate any division between religious life and missionary service. In other words, there is a complete compenetration between one’s personal holiness and the apostolate. Thus, the first movement all Redemptorists must step into is the process of self-conversion and self-transformation in relationship to God who inspires their missionary works. Thus, before Redemptorists can begin to undertake their mission for the benefit of the people of God, the 1997 General Chapter first summoned them to evaluate the relationship between their personal mission and their mission to Christ and to nourish their relationship in faith with him.²¹¹ Since all the members are called to witness to the presence of Christ and to preach the Good News and God’s salvation to the poor and most abandoned, they must choose Christ as the center of their life, and strive day by day to enter into a personal union with him. As this Constitution again says, “The closer their union with Christ, the stronger will become their union with each other.”²¹²

In addition, what is revised in the Redemptorist Constitutions and Statutes is an effort to prioritize the poor in their missionary works and establish a coherence between the Redemptorist vowed life and the life of the people with whom they are being called to live and to work. Since 1991, the General Councils of the Congregation have continued this restructuring process in

²⁰⁹ Puebla, The Final Document, no. 1147, in *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutiérrez, xlii.

²¹⁰ *Constitutions and Statutes*, no. 1.

²¹¹ Cf. XXII General Chapter 1997, *Message*, no. 3.

²¹² *Constitutions and Statutes*, no. 23.

response to the signs of the times and their commitment to fulfill their mission. All members of the Congregation are called to an effective renewal and adaptation to a changing world that still ignores the face of the poor. *Communicanda 1*, published in 2004, proposes that the Redemptorist call is to give up their lives for plentiful redemption. This cannot be “reduced to the domain of a private spirituality, rather, it must take into account the challenges that today’s world sets before us.”²¹³

In reality, the Redemptorist priests and brothers undertake a multiplicity of missionary objectives, tasks, and endeavours as long as the poor are revealed to them therein. *Constitution 1* says, “[the Congregation] does so by responding with missionary thrust to the pressing pastoral needs of the most abandoned, especially the poor, and by devoting itself entirely to evangelization.” For example, there are ministries to the divorced and separated, chaplains to psychiatric clinics and teachers to religious education. There is accompaniment in parish settings and to social victims such as HIV carriers, drugs users, prostitutes and immigrants. There is a ministry of the printed word and especially the development of parish missions, which are considered the preferred way to preach the Good News in the Redemptorist lifestyle.

With the overflow of missionary work, Redemptorists are usually sent as missionaries to rural areas or at least to live in the margins of the cities where the poor are to be found. Here there is the urgent need for the frequent administration of the sacraments and preaching of the Word of God. Thus, Redemptorists look to present themselves as collaborators with lay people striving to work with and to live among the poor.

In general, the Congregation always prioritizes its service to the poor as a way to give glory to God. We cannot say that we love God without first loving our neighbors and we cannot

²¹³ *Communicanda 1, Called to Give Our Lives for Plentiful Redemption* (Curia Generalis C.Ss.R, Romae: 2004), no. 4.

worship God without first caring for the people. The two dimensions of God and of neighbors must come together since the glory of God and the salvation of the world are one. Therefore, whenever and wherever the Redemptorists are, they cannot be forgetful of the poor and their conditions of poverty. The poor are at the heart of Redemptorists' ministries and provide a lens through which Redemptorists are called to see themselves in order to discover their very selves. The lens will show how healthy they truly are and how well they are practicing their spirituality and charism. The lens will reveal to them how compassionate they are in their ministry. The poor offer and shed light on what Redemptorists are doing and hope to do.

In summation, the charism of the Redemptorists is best understood through the preferential option for the poor. This option is now strongly emphasized by liberation theology with a special consideration of Christian praxis. Thus, by taking the spirituality and praxis of liberation theology into account, Redemptorists praxis will carry the reality of the poor and bear the weight of this reality more seriously. The Redemptorists are called to stand with the poor, to be among the poor and to become one with them. The Redemptorists are not Redemptorists if they ignore and forget that the poor are at the center of their apostolate. Likewise, I think it would be a defect in Redemptorist praxis not to pay attention to the contribution of Latin American liberation theology since this theology promotes a serious engagement of the Church in making a preferential option for the poor. In turn, as active agents carrying in themselves such evangelizing potential, the poor will be bearers of the active dynamism of the Redemptorist ministry and inspire newly creative ways of doing ministry. Redemptorists are called to adapt to the new situations of life and the new and various forms of impoverishment. The question for the Redemptorists here and now is whether or not they are ready to be crucified for taking down the

poor from the cross. Caiphas said “It is better to have one person die for the people” (Jn 18,14).

Are the Redemptorists ready to die for the poor?

IV. Encountering the poor as the Redemptorists in Vietnam

It is a fact that in the context of Vietnam, God has chosen the mission for the Vietnamese Redemptorists and has made the poor a gift to them. It would be impossible to make sense of the Redemptorist’s life and mission outside of its newly extended family which is the poor and the most abandoned. Therefore, inspired by liberationist spirituality that began not with abstract concepts, but with a bottom-up movement already engaging the reality of the poor, Vietnamese Redemptorists also places the reality of the poor at the center of their thinking and acting. From the place of the poor, Vietnamese Redemptorists do their mission of evangelization. At the same time, the poor continue to shed light on all Vietnamese Redemptorist activities and options in the society of Vietnam today. In other words, each Vietnamese Redemptorist work is viewed through the lens of its mission and is evaluated in terms of its contribution to evangelizing the poor and being evangelized by the poor.

1. Legacy of Redemptorist’s spirituality in Vietnam and its challenges

The first Congregation of the Redemptorists in Vietnam was established by three Canadian Redemptorists of the Sainte-Anne de Beaupré Province. They came to Hue, the central area of Vietnam in November, 1925. They chose Hue to build the first Redemptorist house in 1929. This group of Redemptorists became a Vice-Province in 1930 and a Province, in May, 1964.²¹⁴

In the context of Vietnam, there are different religious movements engaging in apostolic works of the Catholic Church. According to the discernment of their charism, each religious order presents their option for service. Among the many challenges facing religious orders in a

²¹⁴ Relied on the information of the book of Tu Do Nguyen, C.Ss.R., *History of Vietnamese Redemptorists* (Partial Vietnamese Redemptorist publishing, 2010), original text in Vietnamese.

communist regime, is choosing the appropriate mission. Taking as a point of departure, the spirituality and charism of our founder Saint Alphonsus, the Vietnamese Redemptorists have opted to embrace a preference for the most abandoned. The Vietnamese Redemptorists follow Alphonsus' spirituality whose term "poor and most abandoned" is understood as a special mission that emphasizes the pastoral work with the rural poor. As stated in Constitution 14, "Indeed the apostolic work of the Congregation is distinguished more by its missionary dynamism than by any particular forms of activity; in other words, by evangelization in the true sense, and by service of persons and groups who are poor and more neglected within the Church and society."²¹⁵

Following the tradition of the Redemptorists, the congregation in Vietnam has chosen to associate with people in the rural area. Each Vietnamese Redemptorist community was founded with the precise objective to be sent out in mission. At present, we currently have 331 confreres with 25 houses spread among most of the dioceses of Vietnam.²¹⁶ The purpose of establishing houses in many dioceses is not only to meet the needs of a quickly increasing membership in the congregation. It is also the faithful response of the order to live the charism of accompanying the most abandoned poor in situations of pastoral urgency present in each diocese. As a result, new Vietnamese Redemptorist houses are usually established in the poor rural areas where diocesan priests do not reach.

A very crucial question for all Redemptorists is whether they need to insert themselves in the situation of the poor in order to accompany them? All Redemptorists have to show the capacity to insert themselves and take on the condition of the poor since Saint Alphonsus was inspired by this process of insertion. If the Redemptorist religious life is not an expression of

²¹⁵ *Constitutions and Statutes*, no. 14.

²¹⁶ This data is referenced to the *2016 Memorial Handbook* (Partial Vietnamese Redemptorist publishing), 173-76.

insertion or “incarnation” into the life of the poor, it is not faithful to Christ who became poor for our sake. The Congregation’s sensitivity to the life of the poor is highlighted in Statute 044:

“Therefore, since the members belong to an Institute devoted to the Evangelization of the poor, they must be keenly sensitive to the poverty of the world and to the grave social problems afflicting practically all peoples. Poverty of every kind, whether it be material, moral or spiritual, must challenge their apostolic zeal. The legitimate aspirations of the poor will be their aspirations.” Although Redemptorist religious life by its nature is an election of a special vocation, it is not a setting aside by itself but oriented toward a mission inside the heart of the world. It is like yeast inside the dough to generate a fermentation (Mt 13, 33). Yeast does its job slowly, secretly, and silently, but no one can deny its effect on bread. The nature of the religious life of the Redemptorists is to grow and to transform wherever it makes contact.

If yeast makes dough rise from within, then the Vietnamese Redemptorists who are living in a poor country of Southeast Asia are choosing to be bounded by the material poverty of this nation’s poor. It is not just a way of thinking, loving, praying and hoping but also a way of living the poverty of a socially and materially poor person. The Vietnamese Redemptorists choose this way of life so they can better understand the suffering reality affecting the life of the poor. It is a freely assumed way of life that embraces poverty in solidarity with the poor as they struggle for their liberation. This insertion into the poverty of the poor is also a proclamation of God’s kingdom. As Pope Paul VI said, “above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness.”²¹⁷ Indeed, Redemptorist Bishop Francisco A. Ceballos reminds us that “our community bears witness, not in isolation but, as a presence, in openness to God’s people, in service, and in the ability to share with the people everything we are and have. Redemptorist community life is inserted in the real world, the world of the abandoned and especially the poor. Redemptorists

²¹⁷ Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21.

testify to the love of Christ through the witness of their lives.’²¹⁸ The silent witness of living a ‘poor community’ and ‘brotherly presence’ will always be the most demanding and engaging challenge for the Redemptorists. Such life obviously indicates a sign of the Kingdom of God.²¹⁹

Hence, in every new place to which they are sent, Redemptorists express their insertable or incarnational ability by properly adapting themselves to the context of their ministerial works. This kind of insertion requires the respect to the language and the culture of each human group with whom the Redemptorists are associated. It requires study and knowledge of the language and culture in order to identify what of the Gospel is already present in them and how they can further grow in the Gospel. “The mission of the Redemptorist is not to care for the culture as if it were a museum fossil, but to protect it and help it grow as an instrument of communion among people and of transformation of reality for an integral liberation.”²²⁰ The Redemptorists’ efforts express what the final document of the XXI General Chapter, in 1991, put forward, “in order to make our mission present in history, we need to submit it continually to a process of inculturation and inculturation has for us a special shade of meaning: we are called to read the Gospel here and now from the perspective of the abandoned, especially the poor.”²²¹ The Vietnamese Redemptorists learn to adapt themselves to whomever they are sent, particularly to minority tribes such as Nung, Tay, Bana, H’mong, Ede and Gialai, by learning new languages, different cultures and different religio-social structures. As we will see, Vietnamese Redemptorists are always put in the delicate mission of portraying themselves as a local face so that they can become ‘all things to all people.’²²²

²¹⁸ Sean Wales, C.Ss.R. & Dennis Billy, C.Ss.R., eds., *Lexicon of Redemptorist Spirituality*, 308.

²¹⁹ *Constitutions and Statutes*, no. 8.

²²⁰ Noel Londono B., C.Ss.R., ed., *To Be a Redemptorist Today-Reflections on the Redemptorist Charism*, 352.

²²¹ The XXI General Chapter of Redemptorists in 1991, No. 13.

²²² See Sean Wales, C.Ss.R. & Dennis Billy, C.Ss.R., eds., *Lexicon of Redemptorist Spirituality*, 152.

The poor existing everywhere in Vietnam, especially in poor rural areas, infuse Redemptorists with a new spirit and a creative way of action towards those who are abandoned and marginalized. Vietnamese Redemptorists have responded to the pastoral and social needs of people with their missionary dynamism and pastoral charity. In the context of Vietnam, the Christian praxis proposed by liberation theology is evident in various ministries of the Vietnamese Redemptorists as they struggle for human dignity and the right to practice the Christian faith. In its pastoral plan for 2015-2018, the Redemptorist province of Vietnam decided to make a preferential commitment to the following ministerial works: (1) *Ad Gentes* preaching the Good News to all the people, particular to the minority tribes; (2) Mission which specifically refers to parish missions; (3) Accompaniment of the victims of modern social ills, for example abortion, drugs, prostitution, street children and unmarried pregnant women; (4) Mass media activities in struggling for justice and peace; (5) Pastoral care for immigrants; (6) Pastoral care for the youth; (7) Interreligious dialogue; and (8) Fostering reverence and devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help.²²³ While these eight ministries are all hallmarks of Vietnamese Redemptorists' spirituality, life, and work, the Vietnamese Redemptorists still attach special importance and primacy to the first four works in their preferential options for the poor.

2. Pastoral implications for Redemptorists' ministry in Vietnam

2.1 Ministry for minority tribes

As mentioned above, with the efforts of the government of Vietnam through *Doi moi*, many people in urban areas receive the benefits from the nation's economic growth. However, minority people still lag far behind regarding decent living standards. Fifty-four ethnic minority groups are still subject to both material and spiritual poverty. They are confronted with isolation,

²²³ Cited from the final document produced by the provincial conference of the Redemptorist province of Vietnam in April, 2015. This document is published parts of the provincial letter in May, 2015, 11-12.

limited assets, poor levels of education, poor health, and especially the lack of knowledge in the faith since no ministers have come to preach the Good News to them. The fact is that “the 54 minority tribes living in the highlands provide a huge field for first evangelization. Most of the dioceses in the lower, coastal areas only administer to their parishes and do very little outreach. A strong spirit of evangelization had not yet been emphasized in the Vietnamese Church.”²²⁴ Consequently, being moved by the spirituality inherited from Saint Alphonsus, the Vietnamese Redemptorists chose the ethnic minority tribes in the central highland and north of Vietnam as recipients for their first evangelization.

Among the twenty-five houses in the North and the South, seven houses have been established to offer service to minority groups.²²⁵ About twenty percent of Redemptorist missionaries are serving the people in the highlands.²²⁶ Indeed, there is a great commitment of Vietnamese Redemptorists to the poor, in particular to ethnic minorities in need of evangelization. At a specific missionary place in Fyan, Lam Ha, 55 young people were baptized by Redemptorists in the very early years of their presence, from 1956-1958. This very modest achievement increased to 2,500 people by 1961. By January 2007, the Fyan mission had over 20,000 ethnic people baptized to become children of God.²²⁷ The Redemptorists of Vietnam province continue to establish more mission centers in the highlands of central and northern Vietnam. Redemptorist priests and brothers usually move from village to village, rain or shine, near or far, to say Mass and celebrate the sacraments every day.

²²⁴ *XXIV Capitulum Generale* (Rome, 2009), 429.

²²⁵ The 2016 memorial handbook (in-house Vietnamese Redemptorist publishing), 173-76.

²²⁶ According to the statistic data of the *XXIV Capitulum Generale*, 427-28.

²²⁷ According to the statistics of Nguyen Hung Loi, a Vietnamese Redemptorist missionary at Fyan, in his lecture on the occasion of 50-year memorial day of Fyan community's establishment. It can be found at <http://www.simonhoadalat.com/HOCHOI/Giaohoi/ThuongHuan/ThuongHuan2007/Bai7.htm>

Moreover, inspired by the work and dedication of Saint Alphonsus and his evening chapels, the Vietnamese Redemptorist missionaries have built Latin American-like basic ecclesial communities (BEC) among the minority populations. These communities are an efficient manner of building up partnerships with the laity in order to meet the shortage of ordained ministers and preach the good news to the population. Indeed, the former Redemptorist Superior General, Father Juan Lasso de la Vega, noted that “Our Congregation from the beginning has always been close to the people, particularly the poor and abandoned, and has always sought collaboration with the laity in its apostolic work.”²²⁸ In the context of Vietnam, the Redemptorists are also training indigenous leaders and encouraging them to preside and instruct others in small groups for prayer and catechism. The members of these small basic communities have made a great impact in evangelizing the local population. It is important to note that these communities are not priest-centered but faithful-centered, with sacramental celebrations. The evangelized ones now become evangelizers to others around them.

With the decision to preach the Gospel to the minority tribes, Vietnamese Redemptorists have encountered a number of obvious concerns and challenges. The first is persecution by the government. The more remote the rural areas, the more persecuted religious freedom becomes. When the right to practice the faith is seriously restricted by the Vietnamese government and its communist regime, the option to built up lay partnership and basic ecclesial communities becomes all the more essential. In many missionary places, Redemptorist priests and brothers are not allowed to preach and celebrate the sacraments. In such cases, basic ecclesial communities play a very important role in keeping the faith alive through prayer and Gospel sharing. Thus, the Redemptorist communities have opened themselves up to collaborating with the laity. Careful training has empowered these lay members to have a greater share in our experiences of

²²⁸ Communicanda 4. *Collaboration between the Redemptorist Community and the Laity* (Rome, 1995), no. 3.

spirituality, life, and work. To my mind, these kinds of activities must be multiplied in different ways, not only within Redemptorist communities but also in the ministerial efforts of other religious orders.

In addition, there is a challenge regarding the process of inculturation. On the one hand, the Vietnamese Redemptorist missionaries have to insert themselves into the cultures of those to whom they are sent. On the other hand, there is an urgent need to help ethnic minorities hold onto their own cultural identity. In observing the behavior of these minority groups there are two current tendencies at play. One is associated with the total rejection of their old traditions and a falling in line with the values of modern society. People are drawn to the world of capitalism, technology, social communications, and the excessive consumption of goods. Some minorities seem ashamed of their own culture and their life-style. Others cling to their very conservative life-style and persist in their old traditions. Redemptorists feel called to help them re-discover the roots and values of their own cultures, customs, and living traditions while at the same time helping them identify the gospel values already therein. The most challenging task is to help them realize the continuity that exists between the elements of their culture and the Gospel they are receiving. Likewise, it is a huge challenge to help people discern what is good in other cultures and the modern world.

2.2 Parish mission

The Vietnamese Redemptorists consider their mission, both in terms of parochial ministry and parish mission, as the preferred ways to preach the Good News. The aim is to bring about a renewal in the people's life as stated in the Redemptorist Constitutions: "Redemptorists have as their special mission in the Church the explicit proclamation of the word of God to bring about

fundamental conversion.”²²⁹ In Vietnam, along with the various ministerial tasks such as adult catechesis, Scripture study, and catholic education, the parochial ministry is one of the most popular pastoral works that involve religious congregations. Thus, the parochial ministry also refers to the administration aspect that Redemptorists are called to accept as canonical representatives of parishes in all matters concerning the affairs of those communities. However, it is the parish mission which is most recognized as the distinct contribution of the Redemptorists in preaching the good news to the poor. This is also a distinct ministry of the Redemptorists in Vietnam.

Vietnamese parishes that for a long time were without any preaching or celebration of the sacraments are special targets for the Redemptorist parish missions. The Vietnamese Redemptorists are carrying out this mission with their unmistakable apostolic and missionary zeal. Indeed, the parish mission is a time of great grace. The mission begins with one week of spiritual preparation. This is followed by one week of retreat and then a period of spiritual accompaniment. During the time of mission, the parish will experience “in a heightened and intense way spiritual services, sermons, and sacraments focusing on the major themes of our faith.”²³⁰ The goal of a Redemptorist mission is “to provide a positive experience of God, leading to personal and ongoing conversion in a community setting. Essential elements of the Redemptorist mission are preaching, reconciliation, fellowship, prayer, sacred and sacramental ritual, Scripture, and healing of relationships.”²³¹ In addition, Vietnamese Redemptorists will visit all parishioners in the parish, especially families and individuals who have not practiced their faith for a long time and will invite them to attend the mission activities. These people are

²²⁹ *Constitutions and Statutes*, no. 10.

²³⁰ Cited from the website of the Redemptorists of the Baltimore province at <http://www.redemptorists.net/parish-missions.cfm>

²³¹ Cited from the website of the Redemptorists of the Baltimore province at <http://www.redemptorists.net/parish-missions.cfm>

among the most abandoned poor to whom the Redemptorists desire to bring the good news.

This explicit proclamation of the word of God is carried out by Redemptorists in their preaching of hundreds of faith renewal weeks, retreats, and especially parish missions. From the North to the South, we have achieved great success with parochial ministries in many dioceses. Saigon, Hue, and Hanoi are three important centers where Redemptorists are forming many catechumens. The parochial ministries at these three centers are actively involved in bringing about many activities appropriate to each age group. It is amazing that almost 2,000 people are baptized every year in these places.²³² Likewise, there are “at least 30 parish missions every year.”²³³ In the first three months of the year 2016, already there have been 7 parish missions and that is just in the South of Vietnam.²³⁴

While there are requests for parish missions coming in from the four corners of the country, the Vietnamese Redemptorists are facing many challenges, both external and internal. First of all, there are times when the socio-political conditions of the country make it extremely difficult to do missions, especially following the events of Thai Ha parish in 2008.²³⁵ Due to the fear of being involved in Redemptorists’ work of promoting justice, some dioceses have not welcomed Redemptorist to do parish missions. Therefore, to do a parish mission in the context of Vietnam always requires from the Redemptorists wise discernment and prayer, as well as open-

²³² According to the report which reflected the situation of the Congregation from six regions (Europe-South, Europe-North, North America, Latin America, Asia-Oceania and Africa) sent to the Central Preparatory Commission for the XXIV General Chapter in 2009, *XXIV Capitulum Generale*, 431.

²³³ *XXIV Capitulum Generale*, 432.

²³⁴ Data comes from <http://www.trungtammucvudect.com/web/bible.php?cid=35>

²³⁵ Year 2008 marked two protests in Ha Noi, including the Thai Ha parish’s and Nha Chung lot’s protest [Nha Chung belongs to Ha Noi Archdiocese]. For the Redemptorists, it was a protest at Thai Ha Church against the committee of Ha Noi. The authorities of Ha Noi committee confiscated the land which the Redemptorists bought and have owned it from the State since 1961. However, it was an illegal detainee since the authorities harbored dark designs to split up this land into small parts and would sell them for personal pockets. Discovering their dark plan, Redemptorists at Thai Ha Church insisted on claiming back the land by organizing religious activities such as prayer, lighting candles and saying Mass on the occupied land. The conflict ended when there was a reestablishment to use this land for building up a public park. Though Thai Ha’s protest has lighted an undamped torch of justice and freedom in Vietnam up to present time since it raises a voice of truth to fight against fraudulence and deception of the communist structure in Vietnam.

minded dialogue with the diocesan authorities.

Even though there are some difficulties within diocesan authorities, Redemptorists remember that the mandate to evangelize the poor always directs us to “the liberation and salvation of the whole human person.”²³⁶ In this regard, there exists a close connectedness with liberation theology in its approaching the notion of liberation. As the Brazilian theologian, Leonardo Boff, states, “...to fight against poverty and for the integral liberation of all persons and the whole person-that is what liberation theology means.”²³⁷ There is no distinction between preaching the Gospel and promoting justice and freedom. Besides announcing salvation as liberation from moral degradation and from individual sins, Redemptorists need to stress more liberation theology’s commitment to overcome structural sins. Structural sin is a reality of sin that has structural causes bringing with it death to a majority of the population. In Vietnam, sinful political and economic structures are tied to the oppressive government of the current communist regime. Because the God of Scripture is a God who liberates human beings from both personal sins and unjust socio-economic structure of sin, all Redemptorists have “the duty of preaching the Gospel explicitly and of showing solidarity with the poor by promoting their fundamental rights to justice and freedom. The means employed must be effective and at the same time consistent with the Gospel.”²³⁸

Secondly, the yearly increasing demands of parish missions place an important question on how Redemptorists are to carry out their mission with a limited and often scarce personnel. Since Redemptorists “can never be deaf to the cry of the poor and the oppressed, but have the

²³⁶ *Constitutions and Statutes*, no. 5.

²³⁷ Leonardo Boff & Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oats/Search Press Ltd., 1987), 8.

²³⁸ *Constitutions and Statutes*, no. 5.

duty to search for ways of helping them,”²³⁹ the question is what should they do to meet the needs of the poor. Instead of considering parish missions as spontaneous and voluntary projects from each community, a better choice would be to establish mission teams and designate members to be responsible for this work. Furthermore, Redemptorists must continue to recognize the very important role of the laity in the process of evangelization by progressively incorporating more lay ministers in our mission teams. If we do this, the collaboration between Redemptorists and lay partners in mission will be itself a primary experience of solidarity among the people.

Thirdly, while doing such missions, the Vietnamese Redemptorists should be reminded that they cannot be satisfied by being only preachers. As mentioned above, the Redemptorists are disciples of Christ with the capacity of being re-evangelized themselves. The Redemptorists are not only heralds preaching the Gospel to the poor, but from the poor they themselves hear the gospel and what the kingdom of God reveals through the poor. Indeed, Jon Sobrino has well emphasized this relationship in his theological writings. He discovers that the poor can offer us light, hope, strength, and salvation through what is proper to them.²⁴⁰

Finally, the proclamation of the Word of God demands an attentive and constant listening to the word and to the world. As Saint Augustine affirmed: “the one who does not listen to the word in private becomes an empty preacher of the word in public.”²⁴¹ Likewise, what Leonardo Boff suggests for liberation theologians should be practiced among Vietnamese Redemptorists. Boff states, “The liberation theologian goes to the scriptures bearing the whole weight of the problems, sorrows, and hopes of the poor, seeking light and inspiration from the divine word.”²⁴²

²³⁹ General Statutes, no. 9.

²⁴⁰ Cf. Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope*, 93.

²⁴¹ Cited by *Dei Verbum*, no.25.

²⁴² Leonardo Boff & Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 132.

The Redemptorists must be themselves signs and witnesses of what they proclaim since the gospel they preach has conversion, justice, hope and peace as its goal. By embracing this invitation, each Redemptorist can become “a sign of hope to the poor and abandoned, the opportunity which divine grace will use to lead others to fundamental conversion...”²⁴³

Therefore, the Vietnamese Redemptorists cannot preach conversion unless they themselves are converted every day in prayer and listening to the word of God, privately and communally.

2.3 Ministry to social victims

In Vietnam, the victims of new social ills (drug abuse, prostitution, street children, etc) in large urban areas, deserve special attention by the Redemptorists because these victims are often the most abandoned. The Redemptorist concern for these poor should become incorporated in the early part of their spiritual formation. This consideration is really important for those who want to commit themselves to work with a spirituality of liberation. As Aloysius Pieris says, “no true liberation is possible unless a person is “religiously motivated” toward it. To be religiously motivated is to be drawn from the depths of one’s being.”²⁴⁴ Hence, Redemptorist seminarians need to do their weekly pastoral work such as tutoring, catechetics and assisting others in poor neighborhoods near the seminary. These students must show an ability to work with the poorest people in their nearby locality. It may be pastoral work in the nursing home, in social protection centers, or in houses for leprosy, and HIV patients. It may consist in pastoral work with immigrant students and workers, forming groups and making a network of Christian groups to share faith and Bible study.

At the present time, liberation theology impresses itself upon Redemptorists all the more when it comes to recognize the reality of injustice and oppression as a scandal confronting

²⁴³ Sean Wales, C.Ss.R. & Dennis Billy, C.Ss.R., eds., *Lexicon of Redemptorist Spirituality*, 65.

²⁴⁴ Aloysius Pieris, S.J., *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 100.

freedom and human rights for Vietnamese people. Concentrating precisely on the Christian praxis insofar as liberation theology proposes- as solidarity and discipleship to transcend these social injustices- the Vietnamese Redemptorists are working hard to remove any structure that does not help to promote life and dignity for the Vietnamese people. Among other pastoral activities in favor of the victims of social ills, the Redemptorists are promoting the human rights of war veterans. While the veterans of the Social Republic of Vietnam are getting benefits from the communist government, the veterans of the Republic of Vietnam²⁴⁵ receive absolutely nothing. Most times the veterans of the Republic of Vietnam are considered hostile social forces that need to be removed. As such, the invalid veterans of the Republic of Vietnam are considered to be among the most abandoned groups that the Vietnamese Redemptorists accompany. Hence, the Congregation is involved in giving rise to their voices, to their rights, and especially to their human dignity.

Another important and urgent mission that the Vietnamese Redemptorists must undertake is that of social forgiveness and reconciliation. This is not the time to dig up old wounds and vengeance or to build up a privileged society for individuals or groups of people. This will only increase the risk of tearing the country and the people apart. The Redemptorists have a special mission to help people bridge the past, with the present and create a hopeful future. The Redemptorists are called to be instruments of healing, reconciliation, and unity. This is the proper time for the Church, particularly the Redemptorists of Vietnam, to encourage people to engage in the delicate work of reconciliation.

Moreover, stepping up the program of advocating for the legal protection of human life from conception to natural end is also a remarkable work of the Vietnamese Redemptorist today. The pro-life program reaches out to two groups of people, the unmarried pregnant women and

²⁴⁵ The Republic of Vietnam refers to the State of the South before 1975.

their babies. Many St. Gerard houses for women and their babies have been built by the Redemptorists in most of our big cities, such as Saigon, Hue and Hanoi to support pro-life projects. Concrete works can be seen in informing, educating, and counseling women. St. Gerard House is a house of mercy and love. Most importantly it is a shelter where Redemptorists help unmarried pregnant women feel welcomed and at home.

It is a fact that women are not to be excluded from the emphasis of a liberating theology and praxis. In liberation theology the face of the poor is portrayed in the crucified people who are living in subhuman situations. The poor are those who are materially poor and are dehumanized by persecution, marginalization and deprivation of life for whatever reason. Although the seriousness of this problem has already been discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, I think the Statement of the Asian Women's Consultation, in Manila, in November 1985 clearly reflects the Vietnamese women's situation: "In all spheres Asian women are dominated, dehumanized, they are discriminated against, exploited, harassed, sexually used, abused, and regarded as inferior beings who must always subordinate themselves to the so-called male supremacy. In the home, church, education, and media, women have been treated with bias and condescension. In Asia and all over the world, the myth of the subservient, servile Asian woman is blatantly peddled to reinforce the dominant male stereotype image".²⁴⁶ Thus, Vietnamese Redemptorists make their specific preferential option for women since they are the objects of multiple forms of injustice and oppression.

The feminist movement adds another critical element to the praxis of Vietnamese Redemptorists. Looking over the many negative effects that social-religio-cultural traditions pose

²⁴⁶ Mary John Manazan, "Redefining Religious Commitment in the Philippine Context," in *We Dare to Dream, Doing Theology as Asian Women*, eds. Virginia Fabella, M.M. and Sun AI Lee Park, (Asian Women's Resource Center for Culture and Theology and The EATWOT Women's Commission in Asia, 1989), 109. The original is the statement of the Asian Women's Consolation in *Voices from the Third World*, 8/2 (December 1985): 32-33.

on women, the Vietnamese Redemptorists are encouraged to foster opportunities that enable women to live as human beings fully alive. I hold out the future prospect for such advancement by offering the following pastoral suggestions.

First, the Vietnamese society is highly patriarchal because of the ongoing influence of Confucian philosophy. The answer to the question of what Vietnamese women are looking for in the 21st century is a change in Vietnamese men's mentality towards women. Vietnamese women need men to recognize the shared vocation of parenthood. Therefore, in marriage preparation classes for couples, Vietnamese Redemptorists must strongly emphasize the equal role of man and woman in the marriage. Marriage includes both father and mother in caring for their family. The role of nurturing and educating children no longer belongs to women only, but must be the concern of both parents. Women should grow and function in a society that recognizes them as free whole persons and equal partners in the family. They should be granted the right to vote and to make decisions. They should have the right to negotiate differences and resist injustice so that they are able to become autonomous human beings.

Secondly, we need to include women as teachers in the church and as theologians since "inclusion of women in teaching theology will help to shape the teaching and preaching of the church for alternative experiences within the accepted patriarchal theology."²⁴⁷ Women usually lack the right to be involved in the administration of church affairs. The bishops in Asia realize the importance of encouraging such a participation of women in the life of the Church: "The Synod Fathers were most concerned that the Church should be a participatory Church in which no one feels excluded, and they judged the wider participation of women in the life and mission

²⁴⁷ Christine Tse, "New ways of Being Church," in *We Dare to Dream, Doing Theology as Asian Women*, eds. Virginia Fabella, M.M. and Sun AI Lee Park, (Asian Women's Resource Center for Culture and Theology and The EATWOT Women's Commission in Asia, 1989), 39.

of the Church in Asia to be an especially pressing need.”²⁴⁸ As a result, if the Church in Vietnam wants to raise the voice of women at large, then they have to enhance women’s service within the Church. In other words, women should be given greater opportunities to take on administrative roles. They should also be granted favorable conditions for studying theology and other fields of study. As the final statement of the First Bishops’ Institute for the Lay Apostolate (BILA I) on women in East Asia suggests “women [must] be given support and opportunities, which will enable them to study theology, like: scholarships, childcare facilities for students with children, part-time courses with schedule suitable to women and in convenient locations.”²⁴⁹

Moreover, it is necessary, for men in seminaries and houses of formations, to become open-minded so that women can be trained as co-workers in the apostolate. In his post synodal apostolic exhortation “*Ecclesia in Asia*,” St. Pope John Paul II stated that “Women should be more effectively involved in pastoral programs, in diocesan and parish pastoral councils, and in diocesan synods. Their abilities and services would be fully appreciated in health care, in education, in preparing the faithful for the sacraments, in building community and in peacemaking. As the Synod Fathers noted, the presence of women in the Church’s mission of love and service contributes greatly to bringing the compassionate Jesus, the healer and reconciler, to Asian people, especially the poor and marginalized.”²⁵⁰ In this regard, the final statement of Asian bishops’ discussion on women in East Asia also suggests “That there be, to begin with, at least 30 participation of women in all Church organizations and councils.”²⁵¹ Let Vietnamese Redemptorists study these suggestions and find appropriate ways to put them into practice.

²⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 45.

²⁴⁹ *The Bishops’ Institute for the Lay Apostolate (BILA) on Women in East Asia*, no. 4.4.5.

²⁵⁰ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 45.

²⁵¹ *The Bishops’ Institute for the Lay Apostolate (BILA) on Women in East Asia*, no. 4.4.1.

2.4 Ministry of mass media

Media ministry is an essential tool that the Church encourages us to use for evangelization, especially in this time of rapid technological development and social communications. Pope Paul VI, in the “Decree on the Media of Social Communications” in 1963, affirmed that the “Church recognizes that these media [the press, movies, radio, television and the like], if properly utilized, can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to men’s entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God.”²⁵² Other official and similar teachings of the Church on social communications are conveyed in *Aetatis Novae*, *Communio et Progressio*, Letter to Artists and Rapid Development.

The Vietnamese Redemptorists take part in the mission of the Church to preach the good news to all people by using many activities of the mass media. I remember a wise statement in a homily by a Vietnamese Redemptorist priest that refers directly to this issue. Recalling the famous words of Karl Barth, he said, ‘Redemptorists in the present time must carry the Gospel in his right hand and a newspaper in his left.’ This means the good news must be something concrete, historical, practical and connected with our daily life *hic et nunc*. Social media is a good and effective way for outreach to many people. Indeed, both the pulpit and the editorial office can be considered places where the good news can be effectively preached.

The Redemptorists of Vietnam province run two official websites and other modern media of communications, such as radio and a wide range of print media, to preach the good news and to promote human rights. In 2008, the website www.dcctvn.net helped in our struggles for peace and justice. On this website, people can discover many articles noting many of the unjust situations endured by the Vietnamese people. They can also inform themselves of marches and protest against the unjust practices of the government. In addition, people can share a sense

²⁵² *Inter Mirifica*, no. 2.

of communion with each other through the different offerings on the website, such as attending prayer groups, or listening to homilies, or viewing the Mass online. On the whole, this website is still one of most attractive and viewed websites and has caught the attention of many Vietnamese, both catholic and non-catholic.

Although many efforts have been taken to make Internet connections available to Vietnamese audiences, the Vietnamese Redemptorists still face many barriers because of the government restrictions on broadcasting and publishing. There is still no religious liberty in the Vietnamese's mass media.

In short, these pastoral works that the Redemptorists in Vietnam are doing are an expression of a complete commitment to seeking justice, peace, truth and the liberation of the whole human person for the salvation of the Vietnamese. Redemptorists are ready to take risks while standing shoulder to shoulder with the poor in their struggles for liberation. It can be said that the reality of martyrdom that arises within the Christology of Jon Sobrino strongly resonates with the Christian experience of persecution in Vietnam. The Salvadoran Jesuit martyrs and their Christian witness are an example for the Redemptorists who today continue to bear the witness to the radical option for the poor. Thus, new witnesses of martyrdom can be seen in the urgency of promoting life, justice and peace. Keeping the faith even through dark times of persecution will help built stronger Redemptorists missionaries. In a context where the communist government presents itself as the defender of human rights while at the same time it crushes the hopes of the poor, the Vietnamese Redemptorists continue to lift up the poor as a testimony of a living tradition running through history and being carried out from one generation to another.

General Conclusion

In summation, in reviewing my study of the poor, the world still shows the scandalous presence of poverty, injustice, and oppression. The voices of the poor and the oppressed are crying out from the four corners of the modern world. The tragedy and vulnerability brought on by poverty still shows beyond a doubt that it is largely the work of human hands. Faced with the reality of the poor and oppressed as signs of the times, all people are called to create a world in which the values of justice, equity and humanity are fostered and respected. Everyone is worthy of respect as a human person. As the statement of the Universal Declaration of Human Right, in 1948, affirms, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”²⁵³

In order to promote human dignity, Latin American liberation theologians have launched their theological projects from the bottom-up poverty. The poor have been placed at the center of their theological reflections. Regarding this, Latin American theology proposes an understanding of the Kingdom of God as something, both historical and eschatological, that is associated with the triumph of God’s justice and the praxis of that justice. Working for the Kingdom of God is to read and interpret the signs of the times, and at the same time to seek solidarity and discipleship with those in urgent need. Indeed, there is an urgency to make as a priority the preferential option for the poor. Foremost it is a war to replace the ideology of viewing the poor as the direct objects of poverty. The poor are not just recipients but also donors. They are not only to be the evangelized but to evangelize.

²⁵³ The Universal Declaration of Human Right proclaimed On December 10, 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations, Article 25.

The promotion and protection of human dignity, particularly to the poor, is the mission of the Church. In the context of Vietnam, Redemptorists are sharing the mission of the Church by attentively making a preferential option for the poor, the marginalized and the most abandoned. At the very heart of the reality of the poor, one sees how liberation theology and Redemptorist mission converge in their Christian commitment to the poor and the quest for integral liberation. The Vietnamese Redemptorists, as true disciples of Jesus Christ and followers of St. Alphonsus, must proclaim the gospel and the dignity of the whole human person by their very life, spirit and apostolic endeavors. The statement of Gustavo Gutiérrez is both a challenge and an invitation for the Redemptorists in their options and actions today. His invitation, “to know God is to do justice for the poor.”²⁵⁴

Consequently, we must open our ears to hear, our eyes to see, our hands to support and our hearts to be touched by the reality of the poor. Any shirking of this responsibility in attending to the needs of the poor would be the most costly failure of humankind. Trusting in the love of God, Christians are not just called to light a candle but say a prayer for justice, peace and the promotion of human rights and dignity. Christians are called to be the light of the world. It is only with the help of God that we as human beings can establish justice and liberation as the integral and lasting components for the salvation of body and soul.

²⁵⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 194.

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